

Wake

by Hechicera

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Prologue; Another Thing to Like about Spain

Chapter 1 of 16

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Prologue

He sat quietly in the chair as the three examiners filed into the room. His demeanor was neither arrogant nor subservient; he simply waited, dark eyes luminous in his pale face.

At one end of the table, a red-plumed quill hovered over a parchment scroll; it commenced scribbling furiously the instant the tall black man began to speak.

"Date, time, location, Know all who come by these presents, etc.

"This is the conditional release hearing for Severus Snape, sentenced on the twelfth of August, nineteen hundred and ninety-eight, to a term of twenty years for the killing of a reasonable creature *in rerum natura*, to wit, one Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore."

He paused and looked at the prisoner, who gazed back unblinking, still as granite.

"Present are Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister for Magic; Lydia Fangevogter, Governor of Azkaban; and Harry Potter, Warlock in Ordinary of the Wizengamot."

At the mention of this final name, the prisoner turned his head fractionally to look at the young wizard seated to Shacklebolt's left. The green eyes met his for the briefest of seconds, then slid away to focus on the only other object on the scarred tabletop: an ebony wand laid so that its tip pointed towards the prisoner's chair.

"Madam Fangevogter." Shacklebolt nodded to the grey-haired witch, who settled a pair of steel-rimmed glasses on her nose, unrolled a parchment, and began to read.

"In light of the gravity of the crime, and of the dearth of evidence of any mitigating circumstance, and also"...here she raised her eyes to look at Snape over her glasses..."in view of his unregenerate refusal to show any sign of remorse, it is the judgment of this panel that the prisoner Severus Snape be denied parole at this time, and be returned to custody to serve out the remainder of his sentence."

A moment passed in which the only sound in the room was the scratching of the red quill, and then Shacklebolt said, "Mr. Snape, have you anything you wish to say?"

A long pause. Then, in a low, even voice: "I rather think not."

"Very well, then. These proceedings are adjourned; Madam Fangevogter, you are excused, with the Ministry's thanks."

The quill ceased its scribbling, the parchment furled itself, and a red ribbon appeared and tied around it in a neat bow.

"Shall I send the Aurors in?" asked the witch, with a nod in Snape's direction.

"No, I'd like to have a private word with him before we send him back, if you don't mind."

"Very well." She looked pointedly at the wand on the table. "Don't underestimate him, Minister. He's a very dangerous person."

"Indeed."

Shacklebolt waited until the witch had left the room, then turned his gaze on Snape again.

"Disappointed?" he said.

The faintest twitch pulled at one corner of Snape's mouth. "You can't think that I expected any other decision."

Shacklebolt considered him. "You're not looking particularly well."

The twitch deepened. "Really? I can't imagine why. Ten years in the company of Dementors is ordinarily so salubrious and invigorating."

"Only eight years with the Dementors, Severus."

"Ah, yes, I stand corrected." His voice was icy with contempt. "That little reform didn't last long, did it?"

Shacklebolt heaved a sigh. "It couldn't be helped, I'm afraid. Public safety must remain paramount."

"Is there some reason you're keeping me here, Kingsley? Other than to gloat, in the company of your tame little celebrity, over my continued imprisonment?"

"There is."

When he did not elaborate, Snape settled back in his chair, crossing his legs at the ankle. "I've got nothing but time," he said, with a thin smile.

Shacklebolt made a little grimace of irritation and cleared his throat.

"I can arrange for your immediate release."

Snape's expression did not change, but the black eyes flattened to a sudden opacity.

"In exchange for?"

"There is some . . . work . . . the Ministry would like you to do."

"Work.' Let me guess. Would that be some sort of dark, wet work, Kingsley? The kind the Ministry have always contracted out, because they can't afford to be seen to undertake it?"

"I'm sure I've no idea what you're talking about."

Snape leapt to his feet. "Of course you haven't. Well, you can stick it up your arse, Shacklebolt...and you, too, Mr Ordinary Fucking Warlock Potter." He turned a venomous gaze on Harry. "Sleeping well at night, are you? Happy now that all's right with the world and all the bad, bad wizards are safely locked up in Azkaban?"

Harry's face went ashen.

Shacklebolt leaned forward. "Sit down, Severus, and don't get your bowels in an uproar. It's nothing like that. We just need you to do some research for us."

Snape remained standing and regarded Shacklebolt warily.

"In the last six months, there have been disturbing reports of new hexes, many with dreadful effects and no known countercurse."

"Such as?"

"Spells that cause bizarre dementias, paralyses, degenerating and irreversible conditions. As well as some virulent potions that we've never seen before."

"And what is it precisely that you wish me to do about it?"

"Develop antidotes and countercurses, of course, but mainly find out where it's all coming from. There hasn't been an influx of new magical formulae like this since the Middle Ages. It is . . . worrisome."

"Would you mind explaining exactly why I would be your choice of operative for this job?"

"You're a brilliant wizard, Snape; no one has ever disputed that. I might even say peerless, now that Dumbledore's gone, although believe me when I tell you that the irony of that accession does not escape my notice."

"The world is full of brilliant wizards capable of doing honest research for the Ministry."

Shacklebolt chuckled mirthlessly. "The simple truth, Severus, is that you'll be released from Azkaban eventually, and when that happens, we'd rather have you inside the tent pissing out."

For the first time Snape let his glance flicker towards the wand lying on the table, and his right hand gave a barely perceptible twitch.

He sat down slowly and heavily in the chair.

"Go on," he said.

Chapter 1. Another Thing To Like about Spain

Sunlight, soaking into the skin of his face and forearms and prising golden through the half-finished glass of beer on the table. A small plate of glossy, paper-thin slices of the dark, nutty ham that he had never tasted before this visit but could quickly grow addicted to. The delicious languor that came from a night of profound, untroubled sleep on a soft hotel bed. The forbidden luxury of a cigarette, because this was Spain, where not only did they let you smoke, but no one even threw you a reproachful glance as they strolled past on the cobbled pavement.

All this would have been more than enough. He could have shuffled off his mortal coil right now in complete contentment. But the cherry on top of this intoxicating sundae of sensory delights was the sight of the perfect, round bottom of the Muggle girl who was at this moment bending over to set her things down at the next table.

Snape gazed upon it with lust, affection, admiration, nostalgia. It had been a long time since he'd had nothing in the world to occupy him except the unimpeded view of a woman's beautiful arse. And this was a lovely arse indeed...a perfect inverted heart shape, clad in a pair of khaki shorts, above smooth, tanned legs. In the few seconds it had taken her to set her books down on the table and place a small empty basket on the floor next to her chair, his imagination had already slid his hand up inside the shorts, fingers exploring the humid darkness there, slipping beneath the knickers...were there knickers? Yes, he could see the faint line of the elastic waistband through the

twill of the shorts, drawn tight across her buttocks as she bent forward.

He shifted in his seat.

Ten years in Azkaban without so much as a furtive wank. Not because it was proscribed or somehow prevented, but because Azkaban sucked the very life-force out of you; permeated everything with a damp, grey despair that made the pleasures of the flesh...even the crude, self-induced sort...fade to an irrelevant memory. During the days, all his energy had gone toward maintaining the mental shields that were the desperate safeguard of his sanity; at night, when he would finally fall into a weary sleep, they would falter and he would be tormented by relentless night terrors, only to wake the next morning drained and exhausted, struggling to begin the cycle of self-protection all over again.

Small wonder that his cock had lain dormant, shriveled and forgotten.

But it twitched now into life, a sensation almost like pain after such a lengthy hibernation.

Across the plaza, a middle-aged woman was watching him watch with wry amusement. She caught his eye and gave a complicit smile, lifting her wineglass...one of those odd stubby tumblers they served wine in down here...in a little salute.

He nodded in acknowledgement, and returned his attention to the lovely arse. Another thing to like about Spain...even the women expected you to look at women.

At what age, he wondered, did Spanish women abruptly metamorphose from the sultry, forbidding, whip-thin sex goddesses striding down every street in pointy-toed stiletto heels into stocky matrons in boxy tweed suits and sensible shoes like the one now observing him over her wineglass? There didn't seem to be an intermediate stage, only the two radically disparate forms. In another ten years, would the owner of this ravishing arse forego her morning run for an extra churro or two and a visit to a purveyor of dowdy woolens?

He sincerely hoped not. She was sitting now with her back to him, giving him a clear view of a slender neck, left bare by a chic crop of very short brown curls. The haircut might even have seemed a boy's, had Snape not already been treated to the prospect of that delicious arse.

She ordered in a no-nonsense voice, speaking perhaps a bit more slowly than most of her compatriots. It was difficult for Snape to gauge; he was aware only that he could actually understand much of what she was saying, whereas the Spanish spoken to him under most circumstances seemed to flash by at more or less the speed of light.

His Spanish was rudimentary at best: he could order a meal and secure a night's lodging, and that was about it. He would need to learn more, he thought, if his physical recovery continued apace; he could just imagine himself, at his current level of fluency, approaching some woman in an alley and asking, "Mi chorizo en tu boca, ¿cuánto dinero?"

The object of his present observation had withdrawn a pen and a small notepad from her handbag, and from time to time peered down into the basket and wrote something on the pad. This was odd, as the basket was clearly quite empty, and Snape began to wonder if perhaps she was not in complete possession of her faculties. That would account for the slow speech as well, he admitted to himself reluctantly, and it would be a damned shame. Fine arse or no, he could hardly lust after a woman who was obviously not in her right mind.

That might be the only kind likely to lust after you, said a voice in his head, before he could stifle it.

Just then a football came bouncing in off the plaza, followed immediately by a small boy, who tripped over the basket and sent it skittering across the cobbles.

"¡Malcriado!" the girl cried after him, and was out of her chair in pursuit of the basket in an instant.

As she was returning with it, her face turned briefly in Snape's direction, and he saw with a frisson of shock that she was disfigured: a scar ran from one corner of her mouth outwards along the jawline, the silvery puckered skin pulling slightly at the right side of her mouth.

One forgot, living in the Wizarding world, that such disfigurements were common among Muggles. A competent magical Healer could repair any ordinary wound so as to leave no visible trace; only the most devastating of hex-caused injuries was likely to leave a permanent mark in its wake.

He wondered how this woman had been injured. Perhaps the scar was the result of the same accident that had robbed her of her reason, he mused. Her behavior now had become downright bizarre. Dragging the basket after her, she was crawling about under the tables on all fours, patting the ground repeatedly with one hand and making an odd little chirping noise. At one point, preoccupied with this strange groping, she banged her head smartly against a table leg and, to Snape's astonishment, said in a loud voice, "Damn it to bloody fucking *hell!*"

Feeling vaguely guilty about his earlier lechery, he rose from his chair and made his way towards her.

"Miss?" he said, leaning down. "Can I perhaps be of assistance?"

"Stop!" she barked. "Don't move!"

And then she looked up at him, and her brow furrowed, and she said, in a much softer, more tentative voice:

"Professor?"

A/N: I have such a great beta/Britpick/espanpick team: corianderpie, exartemarte, canny, and angie. To the extent that my writing doesn't suck, it's down to them.

Some Things Never Change

Chapter 2 of 16

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JK Rowling.

Chapter 2 Some Things Never Change

"Miss Granger?"

Christ, it was him. She scrambled to her feet and dusted off her knees, then wiped her hands on the seat of her shorts and stood awkwardly, wondering whether she should offer to shake his hand.

He seemed smaller, somehow, than she remembered. But then of course she remembered him as being impossibly tall and looming, when in fact he stood six feet at the most, and quite possibly only five-eleven.

She remembered him as darker, too, more olive-skinned than the thin, chalk-complexioned man standing before her. The voice, though, she would have recognized anywhere: rich and dark as bitter chocolate. A voice that had slid insidiously into the nightmares of hundreds of Hogwarts students over the years.

"Would you care to join me?" the voice said, and he inclined his head towards his table.

"I...yes, of course, that would be nice," she said, but as he turned to make his way back she grabbed his arm. "No, wait, don't walk anywhere! Just, just sit here for a minute." She gestured towards the empty table, her gaze darting frantically about the plaza.

"Miss Granger, what *are* you on about?"

"I've lost my guinea pig. I'm afraid you'll step on her."

He was looking at her oddly, with something that on any face but Snape's would have looked like pity. "I'm not blind, you know. I'm perfectly capable of avoiding errant rodents."

"She's invisible," she hissed. "I gave her a potion. But" ...she looked at her watch... "it should be starting to wear off any minute now."

"Really? An invisibility potion?"

"Shhh!" She looked around anxiously at the other patrons of the café, several of whom were staring quite openly at them.

"We're in Spain, Miss Granger, in case it had escaped your notice."

"Ots-lay of-ay eople-pay ere-hay eak-spay English-ay," she said.

"Are you experiencing some sort of religious glossolalia?"

"No, you great nit," she said in exasperation. *Oh, fuck ME, I just called Professor Snape a nit.* "They may speak English, but they can never understand Pig Latin."

"What in Merlin's name is Pig Latin?"

"For Christ's sake, never mind. Oh, look, there she is, over by the fountain!"

Tuppenny had finally begun to reappear and was in an intermediate stage of translucence that made her easier to spot if you didn't look directly at her. Hermione picked up the basket and a cloth napkin from the table, strolled with elaborate casualness across the plaza, and sat down on a stone bench. She dropped the napkin and then scooped up its tented form into the basket.

Snape had returned to his own table, so she made her way there. Now that her agitation over the loss of the guinea pig had passed, she was feeling slightly self-conscious about the abrupt way she had been speaking to him. *Although really, we've been quite . . . intimate, if you think about it. Shit, I wonder if he IS thinking about it?*

"So, Miss Granger," he was saying, "what brings you to Salamanca?"

"The library."

One corner of his mouth lifted in a half-smile. "Some things never change, I suppose. And by the way, my apologies for not recognizing you sooner...you look quite different, really. Perhaps if you had been waving your hand wildly in the air I would have been a bit quicker off the mark."

"You look different, too, Professor." She paused. *How to say this?* "Have you been ill?"

"Not ill, no. But it would certainly be an exaggeration to say I've been well. And, Miss Granger, I haven't been 'Professor' for over a decade now."

"Oh, shit," she blurted out. "I forgot, you've been, you've been in..."

"Prison, yes." The black eyes regarded her levelly. Despite the warmth of the day, he was wearing a long-sleeved black turtleneck; she wondered if he still had the Mark on his arm.

"But it's only been ten years, hasn't it? I thought you were sentenced to twenty." *Nice going, Hermione. Just say anything that pops into your mind. Anything at all.*

He seemed unperturbed. "They paroled me."

"Really? I would have thought..." *Just shut UP, for god's sake. What is WRONG with you?*

"Quite." He gave a tight little smile. "Imagine my astonishment."

The waiter arrived with her glass of wine and slice of tortilla, and she seized upon the interruption with relief. "Y la cuenta, enseguida, por favor," she said, looking up, and he nodded. "You have to really rag them about the bill," she said to Snape. "Otherwise they'll let you sit here forever."

"I had noticed that," he said. And then, after a pause, "Anything in particular you've been researching in the library here?"

"Languages, of course," she said, taking a bite of tortilla and beginning to talk round it in what she realized was actually quite a rude manner. *really have been living on my own for too long.* "They have the best philology collection in the Western hemisphere, especially the writings on Proto-Indo-European."

"And when did you develop an interest in prehistoric tongues?"

"When I realized that there hadn't been any new sp..." She looked around. "Really, you never learned Pig Latin when you were a child?"

"When I was a child, Miss Granger, I read *De vita Caesarum* in the original. But I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"Tutnese, then?"

He shook his head.

"Obenglobish? Gibberish?"

"I wasn't aware one could actually learn to speak gibberish, but perhaps I am mistaken."

She sighed. "Well, we can't talk here, then. Not about my research, anyway." She turned and looked for the waiter. "Where's the effing bill? Don't they understand that some of us have better things to do than sit in the sun and gossip all day?"

"I was quite enjoying the gossiping, actually."

He was looking at her with amusement . . . and something else. She remembered how he could look like this: the outward expression somehow careless and offhand, but underneath . . . underneath there was a watchfulness, a calculation, and you knew he was missing nothing.

Hard to believe they had paroled him, after the uproar that had accompanied his trial and imprisonment. She wondered if Harry had had anything to do with Snape's release.

Snape had finished his beer, and she realized suddenly that she didn't want the encounter to end just yet.

"Professor," she said, "would you like to see my lab?"

"You have a laboratory? I thought you were researching ancient languages."

"I am. But there's not much money in that. Well, I take it back, yes, there is; quite large amounts, actually, but it tends to come at infrequent and completely unpredictable intervals. The work that pays my rent is in, er,"...she looked around again..."chemistry. I'd be interested to know what you think of it."

"Ever the overachiever, Miss Granger."

"Coming from you, I think I'll take that as a compliment."

"Oh, I wouldn't, if I were you. You know, if you expect to be taken seriously in the Academy, you'll need to settle on a single area of concentration sooner or later. You can't continue to dabble in every field that takes your fancy; you'll get a reputation as a dilettante."

She snorted. "What makes you think I give a monkey's about my reputation with the Academy?"

"Out of all my students, you are one of the few I would have expected to continue your studies."

She shook her head. "It just seemed so . . . self-indulgent, after the war. After what we'd all been through, I couldn't work up any enthusiasm for publishing articles in obscure journals that no one ever reads."

He nodded. "Understandable, if a bit short-sighted. So you have a private . . . chemistry business here in Salamanca?"

"No, I live up north, on the coast. I just come down a couple of times a week to visit the library." She looked around again for the waiter, then rummaged in her handbag, pulled out some euro notes, and shoved them under her wineglass. "No tip for you, Julio. Shall we go, Professor?"

"Miss Granger, for the last time, I am no longer anyone's professor."

"I'm sorry, I just...well, I don't really know what to call you, then. You've always been Professor Snape to me."

"Just 'Snape' will do."

"Only if you call me 'Granger.' Sauce for the goose."

"I suppose it should not surprise me at all that you've turned out to be tiresomely feminist."

"Oh, you don't know the half of it," she said cheerfully. "Now, I really would like to show you my lab, if you're willing to side-along with me."

"Lead the way."

They walked several blocks, until they came upon a freestanding structure about the size of two side-by-side call boxes, with a sign that read *4seo*. Hermione put a coin into a slot in the door and motioned for him to follow her inside.

"Miss Granger," he said as he entered, "please tell me this is not a public toilet."

"All right, this is not a public toilet."

"It clearly is. The reek is unmistakable."

"The sooner you stop complaining and take my hand, the sooner we'll be out of here."

A/N: Hermione's guinea pig Tuppenny is my little *homage* to Beatrix Potter's wonderful book *The Fairy Caravan*.

Thanks to my beta Dream Team: exartemarte, corianderpie, and Angie.

Concern for Your Immortal Soul

Chapter 3 of 16

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

"Did it never occur to you, Miss Granger, to locate your Apparition point at the top of the hill rather than at the bottom?"

"Yes, it did, but there's no decent cover at the top, just rocks and the lighthouse."

Really, he thought, he shouldn't be complaining: if she made this climb at least once a day, that would account for the firmness of her gluteals...now precisely at his eye level, several paces in front of him.

The initial shock had worn off slightly, and his lascivious interest in her arse had reasserted itself, compelled as he was to observe its movement as he climbed the steps behind her.

"It's not far now; that blue house just up there." Damn the girl, she wasn't even out of breath. He, on the other hand, was collecting more firsthand evidence of the health benefits of ten years' confinement in a cell the size of the average bathroom.

They entered the house through a side door, passing through her wards into a high-ceilinged sunlit room lined on one side with books and on the other with laboratory equipment. The room evidently spanned the width of the house, as the wall opposite the entrance sported a pair of French doors that gave onto a small balcony overlooking the ocean.

His gaze swept over the ranks of gleaming equipment: shelves upon shelves of cauldrons, burners, glassware, stainless steel utensils, protective gear. In one corner stood an apparatus that looked like a complicated multihead shower.

"Is that a HazPot station?"

"Yes, it is," she said proudly. "The latest model, from Paracelsus Supply. I ordered it last month."

Snape felt an acid wave of envy wash over him.

"Professor? You should sit down; you're not looking at all well. Shall I put the kettle on?"

He nodded brusquely. *Just leave, please. Go away and leave me alone in this beautiful, terrible room.*

She did not leave, however. Instead, she set a pot of water to boil on a laboratory burner and procured a tray of tea things from one of the cabinets.

God damn it all to hell. This was supposed to be my life.

Except that in his version it had always been Barbados.

That vision, of Life After the War, had sustained him through many a long, dark night of double servitude; many a morning spent recovering from a punitive round of Cruciatius dealt out by the Dark Lord. He would lie in his bed, drowning in pain and fear, and imagine how life would be: a modest business of his own, managed from a sunny cottage much like this one. Mornings spent brewing potions for a small, exclusive clientele; afternoons sitting, book in hand, on a veranda, sipping drinks with tiny umbrellas stuck in them.

It had been a healing balm for his frayed nerves and ulcerous stomach, that vision. A place for his mind to go when the immediate reality became intolerable.

After the War he would be warm.

After the War he would answer to no one.

After the War he would be free.

Instead, ten years later, he was once again in thrall. Pale and weak from his stint in Azkaban, his profound dread of being sent back there making him willing to serve, to scheme, to lie. Full circle, no closer to his dream after a decade of fear and cold and misery and exhaustion.

A chirruping noise had begun to emanate from the napkin-covered basket that Hermione had set on the floor by the French doors; on hearing it, she crossed the room and removed the napkin to reveal a brown and white guinea pig. "What a good girl you are," she crooned, scooping the creature up and carrying her out to a small hutch on the balcony.

"You've stolen their napkin," Snape said mildly when she returned.

She looked down at the cloth in her hand and shrugged. "It wouldn't be the first thing I've stolen," she said, "and I don't expect it will be the last. I imagine they'll get over it." She glanced a little nervously towards a high bookshelf, and he followed her gaze to see a row of ancient tomes with Spanish titles on their thick spines.

He regarded her with frank astonishment. "Miss Granger, is it possible that you have stolen books from the Salamanca University library?"

"All things are possible, Professor."

Sarcasm enriched the dark voice. "I'm shocked that you have so little concern for your immortal soul."

"I beg your pardon?"

"If I recall correctly, there is a prominently displayed papal declaration in that library, threatening the excommunication of anyone who removes or defaces a book."

"One, I'm not Catholic, so I don't give a rat's arse about excommunication; and two, I'm just borrowing them. I'll return them when I'm finished. No one reads that stuff but me anyway." And then, in response to his look, "What?"

"Who are you and what have you done with Hermione Granger?"

She gave him a long look. Finally she said, "I survived her."

"Fair enough." He took the cup of tea she was offering him and spooned sugar into it. "So, would you like to tell me about this Invisibility Potion? Is that something of your own devising?"

"It is, yes. Do you remember Fred and George's Peruvian Darkness Powder?"

He shook his head.

"No, I don't suppose you would; you weren't exactly in their inner circle, were you?"

"Hardly." He took a sip. Not surprisingly, she made very good tea.

"Well, I went there...Peru, I mean...looking for the source of that powder. I figured if it had the power to suck the light out of a room, there must be other things it was good for."

"And you found it?"

"Yes, it's a plant, *Carica parviflora*, from the Tumbes-Piura forests. The powder is made from its flowers, which are quite tiny."

Aaand, she's off, thought Snape. This was the Hermione Granger he remembered: absorbed in her subject, her voice earnest, her eyes shining, absolutely convinced that everyone else found whatever arcane subject she was researching as fascinating as she.

Which...at least in this case...he did. "So," he said, "you found a source for this plant?"

"Oh, yes," she said. "It's a woody shrub about a meter high. It blooms twice a year, which naturally is when they collect the flowers. I dug up several specimens and brought them back and planted them in the greenhouse."

"You have these plants growing here?"

"Yes, of course," she said impatiently. "But that's not the interesting part. Here's what's fascinating. I used some of the roots to brew a potion."

"Which...let me guess...you fed to that hapless creature out on the veranda."

"Well, I knew it wasn't poisonous. And I couldn't very well drink it myself. I mean, that's why they call them guinea pigs, isn't it?"

"I rather think you have that backwards, but do go on."

"So here's the thing. The potion not only confers invisibility, it makes the subject completely undetectable by any of the five senses. Well, four, at any rate: I haven't actually tried to *taste* her."

"You've tried smelling her, then?"

"Better than that. When she's had the potion, Crookshanks can't even tell that she's in the room, and believe me, when she's in her natural state he's *very* interested."

Snape looked about the room in mock alarm. "Good god, don't tell me you still have that monstrous creature?"

She laughed. "I'm beginning to think he may be immortal. But he sleeps most of the time these days."

"Four senses, you said . . . but you were feeling for her under the table at the restaurant."

"Yes, but not feeling for her exactly. What happens is, if you touch her there's no sensation: you don't feel her warmth, or the softness of her fur. But you're aware that there's an obstacle, because your hand can't pass through her...that's just elementary physics."

"So you feel a resistance." He was aware that his bitterness and resentment were melting away, replaced by a growing curiosity. Merlin's teeth, but she was bright. Why the hell hadn't she been sorted into Ravenclaw?

"Exactly." She was beaming.

"Hmm. I can see how such a potion could be very useful indeed."

"That's what I thought, at least at first. I mean, complete undetectability, how great would that be? Better than an invisibility cloak. But there's a bit of a problem."

"There always is."

She smiled ruefully. "It's the clothes."

"What about them?"

"Don't you see, the potion affects only your body. Your clothes stay visible."

He snorted. "So you have to go naked, or it's no use at all."

"Exactly." She was grinning hugely now. "Which is what I was doing in the restaurant when you saw me."

"Going naked? I believe I would have noticed."

"Not going naked, don't talk nonsense. I was timing the effects. I figure if you have to go naked, then it's rather important to know exactly when the potion is going to wear off. So I've been giving Tuppenny measured doses and recording how long it takes for her to become visible again."

"Why couldn't a person just carry a supply and take a second dose when the first one started wearing off?"

"In what?"

"In a vial, of course . . . oh, I see."

"Precisely. You can't exactly go about your nefarious business accompanied by a mysterious, fully visible, floating vial."

"So timing is everything."

"Yes." She looked exhilarated: her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright. "I can't tell you how much I've missed having someone to discuss my work with. It was such luck that we happened to run into each other."

It was later in the afternoon than he had realized: the sun was low in the sky and a chilly breeze had begun to blow in through the open French doors.

"Fortuitous indeed," he said.

A/N:

Many thanks to my wonderful beta/Britpick team: corianderpie, exartemarte, and lifeasanamazon.

Carica parviflora is a real plant; you can read about it, and see a picture, here. <http://www.bihrmann.com/Caudiciforms/subs/car-par-sub.asp>

The Salamanca library does indeed have the referenced sign, posted around the year 1440; you can see it here.

<http://qalachaki.deviantart.com/gallery/#d2dipi7>

The village where Hermione lives is loosely modeled on Cudillero, Spain. You can see a picture here:

<http://www.casavitorio.com/surroundings/img/grande/cudillero.jpg>

The line "Who are you and what have you done with Hermione Granger?" occurs in one of the HP films but not, as far as my research can tell, in canon.

The Fingers of One Hand

Chapter 4 of 16

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR.

Chapter 4. The Fingers of One Hand

It had seemed the most natural thing in the world to ask him to stay for dinner.

She took a packet of sardines from the refrigerator and began cleaning them, cutting off the heads and removing the backbones.

"Will I make us a salad, then?" asked Snape.

"That would be brilliant. There's lettuce in there, and some tomatoes, and a bell pepper, I think. And maybe some spring onions."

He pushed his sleeves up to wash his hands and she saw it then, a blur of blue-grey against his pale skin.

Not like before, when it had pulsed starkly on his forearm like a living thing. The skin beneath it had at first been an angry red, and then had quickly paled as his life leaked out between her desperate fingers onto the wooden floorboards.

Now, turning the tiny, slippery fish on the cutting board, her hands remembered the slickness of his cooling blood, and began to tremble.

He had turned away to assemble the salad ingredients, and so she had a merciful moment to steady herself before retrieving a bottle of Riesling and two glasses from the cupboard. She passed him the bottle and a corkscrew, not sure why; she certainly knew how to open a bottle of wine, but the small deference seemed appropriate.

He handed her a glass and lifted his own. "Confusion to our enemies."

She smiled faintly and touched her glass to his, and drank.

She had knocked back the first glass with hardly a pause, he noted, and was well into her second by the time the meal was ready. He collected the periodicals scattered about the table and shoved the pile to one side.

"The *Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry and Neurology*?" he asked, holding up an issue.

"Yes, er, part of some spell research I've been doing," she said, putting a pair of plates and a basket of bread on the table. "Would you mind getting the silver? It's in that drawer over there. Oh, and napkins, too, please."

They sat down and she handed him the plate of sardines.

"Spell research? In geriatric psychiatry?" He forked three crisply grilled fish onto his plate. "Do please explain."

"I have an aunt in America. Really my only family, now that my parents are gone. I talk to her now and then."

He wondered what she meant by her parents being "gone." He had some recollection that they had been sent away during the war...was that what she meant? Or were they dead?

"Her father-in-law...my great-uncle John...has Lewy body dementia."

"How can a body have dementia?"

"No, it's not dementia of the body. Lewy bodies are microscopic clumps of protein that form in the brain."

"And what has this got to do with spells?"

"One of the symptoms is that when patients fall, their bodies are completely rigid. They fall like trees, not like human beings."

"Signs," he said automatically.

"Pardon?"

"The rigidity is a *sign*, Miss Granger, not a *symptom*."

"Aren't those the same thing?"

"They are not. Symptoms are experienced by the patient; signs are observable by another."

"Oh. I never knew that. Thank you. 'Some things never change,' indeed." She grinned. "Professor."

He paused, his fork halfway to his mouth. He could count on the fingers of one hand the students he had had, in sixteen years of teaching, who had thanked him for

correcting them.

"Old habits die hard, I suppose. Do go on about the dementia."

"Well, when Aunt Jean told me about that...the falling, I mean...the first thing I thought was 'Body-Bind Curse.'"

"It does bear a certain resemblance, yes."

She leaned forward. "Haven't you ever wondered how curses *work*? Especially since so many of them seem to resemble actual human diseases?"

"What do you mean, how they work?"

"I mean, what's the *mechanism*? Why should certain spells be able to provoke boils, or vomiting, or memory loss? What exactly do they *do*?"

"I don't think anyone knows."

"Too right they don't. And why isn't anyone creating new spells?"

"The occasional person does, I believe," he said dryly.

"Oh, well, yes, I suppose so." She colored slightly. "But for the most part, we're all using spells that have been around for hundreds or even thousands of years, without giving a thought to why they do what they do, as if it were just hocus pocus, just some kind of..."

"Magic?"

She laughed. "Magic. Exactly. Whereas if we knew more about how they worked, we'd know more about how to counter them. Plus, we could create new ones methodically, instead of just stumbling about in the dark and hoping to trip over a winning formula."

"So you've been researching neurological disorders."

"And endocrine, and musculoskeletal," she added, waving a forkful of salad inclusively.

"Looking for new possibilities," he said slowly.

"Just so."

"And what do you do with these new spells, once you create them?"

"Publish them, or sell them."

"There's money to be made in that?"

"Certainly. Though, as I said before, the potions business is steadier. But the disease research applies there as well."

He was silent, thinking about the slip of paper in his trouser pocket. *Best to stop with the interrogation before it occurs to her to wonder why you're asking all these questions.*

He contented himself with watching her as she applied herself to her food. The short hair suited her: it wreathed her face in a soft halo of curls, and made no pretense at concealing the scar that pulled at the side of her mouth. Her eyes were the color of copper, and when she looked up at him he felt scorched by the intelligence that burned in them.

"You're staring at me."

"Am I?"

"What are you thinking?"

That you are magnificent. "That you are a very dangerous woman, Miss Granger."

She gave a little snort. "Just making a living."

"You could have made a living teaching, or working for the Ministry."

"*Fuck* the Ministry! I'd sooner scrub toilets at Victoria Station."

The bitterness and vehemence in her voice startled him as much as the vulgarity. "You have some issue with the Ministry?"

"You could say that. One or two small things." Her mouth was a thin line.

"Such as?"

She looked at him incredulously. "Besides sending *you* off to Azkaban for twenty years for a crime you didn't commit? That's not enough?"

"I was duly convicted," he said calmly. "By a jury of my peers."

"Your peers!" she spat. "Kept in ignorance by the Ministry and terrified to let a murdering Death Eater back onto the streets."

"I *did* kill him, after all."

"Because you had to! Because he begged you to!"

"The jury didn't know that."

"Harry knew. And if the jury didn't, it's only because he and Shackbolt kept them in the dark. And because you refused to testify at all."

"It wouldn't have mattered, you know. A person can't legally consent to being killed."

Her eyes were fire. "They could have freed you and you bloody well know it! Why are you making excuses for them?"

Because it fascinates me to hear you defend me.

"Because it's water under the bridge, now. I'd rather just get on with things."

She looked at him steadily for a long moment. When she spoke again, her voice was quieter, but still intense.

"Are you really satisfied to be on parole for the next ten years? Don't you want to clear your name?"

"I doubt any efforts on my part would be well received. Likely to do more harm than good, I should think."

"I don't see how that's possible."

"People are happy with the version they've been fed, Miss Granger. They have their heroes, and their villains, everyone in his proper place. It would serve nothing to disrupt that idyll."

When she made no response, he said, "Potter has surely said as much to you."

Her eyes blazed again. "We don't speak," she said tersely.

This was a surprise. "Since when? As I recall, you were quite chummy at school."

"Since the war. We don't speak since the war."

He couldn't resist goading her a bit. "I quite imagined the two of you would marry and raise a pack of obstreperous children."

"Don't be absurd."

And in an instant, the animation was gone from her face, the light in her eyes extinguished as if he had pinched out its flame with his fingers.

Bugger.

There was a loud rattling sound outside the window. "What the hell is that?" he said, grateful for the interruption.

Hermione had jumped to her feet and was smiling again. "That'll be my delivery from Peru," she said, opening the window over the sink.

The creature that clambered through the opening and perched awkwardly on the kitchen counter was of a species he did not recognize: a sleek black marine bird with a red throat. It had a long white bill, hooked at the tip, with which it plucked the proffered sardine head from Hermione's fingers.

She unfastened the packet from the bird's leg and brought it back to the table. "*Restauro*," she said, tapping it with her wand. The resultant shoebox-sized parcel, when unwrapped, revealed a quantity of knobbly brownish roots.

"*Carica parviflora*," she said, her eyes dancing with excitement. "Now I can make enough of the Invisibility Potion to begin serious testing."

She gathered up the roots and carried them into the laboratory. Snape stayed behind in the kitchen, leafing through the stack of journals. There was a half-sheet of quadrille paper marking a place in one of them, and he lingered for a moment, reading the notes written on it in Hermione's neat hand.

In the lab, she had placed the roots into a large apothecary jar and was writing out a label.

"I should be going," he said. "The meal was excellent...thank you for inviting me."

She looked up at him. "I wonder..." she began diffidently.

Yes.

"Yes?"

"Would you...I don't know how busy you are, but would you be interested in helping me tomorrow? With the potion preparation and testing, I mean?"

"I don't see why not."

Her smile at once warmed and chilled him. "Excellent," she said.

A/N: Thanks to my fabulous beta/Britpick team: corianderpie, lifeasanamazon, and exartemarte.

Signs vs. symptoms is a pet peeve of mine, and it always irks me to hear journalists--and sometimes medical professionals--confuse the two. So consider yourselves warned.

The bird that brings Hermione's package is a Magnificent Frigatebird (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magnificent_Frigatebird) renowned for its ability to fly for days without resting, and also for its habit of forcing other birds to regurgitate their meals when it's feeling peckish.

The Preponderance of Exotica

Chapter 5 of 16

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Disclaimer: All the good stuff is JKR's. I'm just along for the ride.

Chapter 5 The Preponderance of Exotica

It was a bit intimidating, really.

She imagined her little homegrown lab under his merciless, critical gaze. He would surely approve of the scales, the cauldrons, the ambarine goggles . . . but she cringed to think what he might say about her considerable collection of glassware and electrical devices. She could almost hear it now: some cutting remark about Muggle recidivism, delivered in that dry, sarcastic tone . . . the one that had always been able to send her off to cry in the girls' loo.

Shit. What was I thinking? Why not just stab myself in the eye with a fork?

Well, it was too late to turn back now; he would likely be here any minute.

Besides, you know why you did it. Because it's Snape.

Yes. Severus Snape, the most skilled philtrist of his generation, here *in her* laboratory. Assisting her, advising her, working with her. There was simply no way she could pass up such an opportunity. If it meant enduring some verbal abuse, surely she could manage that? It had been ten years, after all. She was a grown woman now, and more . . . resilient.

Except that she didn't feel at all resilient at the moment. Or even grown up, for that matter. A certain ease had developed between the two of them the evening before, but it had been helped along by the sunset, and the meal, and by a bottle and a half of very good wine.

Now it was morning, and that sense of equality and camaraderie had proved as evanescent as last night's dreams.

She breathed deeply and busied her hands scrubbing the *parviflora* roots.

You're colleagues now. Just two colleagues working on a project together. He's not Professor Snape anymore, he's just Snape.

The knock at the door made her jump. "Pase," she said automatically, and then felt foolish, for of course it was him. Drying her hands on a lab towel, she opened the door. "Come in, I mean."

He gave a brief nod. "Miss Granger."

"Snape," she said, and stood aside to let him enter. "Would you like some tea? Or . . . have you had breakfast? Would you like something to eat? *Would you mind if I ducked into the kitchen for a quick shot or two of Firewhisky?*

"No, thank you," he said. "I'd just as soon get started, if it's all the same to you."

Well, you never were one for the social niceties, were you?

Still, she realized, working would likely calm her as quickly as anything. "I was just getting the things together."

She handed him the recipe and watched as he scanned down the list of ingredients.

"Cassia bark, gingerroot, cranesbill," he said, and looked up at her. "Antiemetics. Makes one vomit, does it, this invisibility root?"

She made a face and nodded.

He thought for a moment. "If I might make a suggestion?"

"Of course."

"Have you got any *Viburnum opulus*?"

"I believe so, yes."

"You might try substituting it for the cassia bark. Its aroma isn't as pleasing, but it has a powerful antispasmodic property that would be more effective, in my opinion."

He followed her across to the little storeroom and stood in the doorway while she climbed the ladder and rummaged among the jars and packets.

"Here you go," she said, handing him down a dusty jar labeled *Cramp Root*.

"Excellent." He consulted the handwritten sheet again. "Have you considered adding something to improve stability?"

She paused in her descent. "Such as?"

"A very small amount of powdered bovine abomasum would do, I should think. And would have the advantage of helping to counteract the gastric upset as well."

"I haven't got cow; how about alpaca stomach lining?"

"That should work."

"Over there." She pointed to a spot on the first shelf. "In the small brown bottle."

He was wearing a plain white shirt with the first button undone. As he bent to retrieve the bottle, his hair swung forward and she could clearly see, from her vantage point on the ladder, the shiny purplish scar that ran down the length of his neck and disappeared beneath the shirt collar. For a fleeting moment she had a mad impulse to lean down and press her mouth to his neck, to see if the two scars fit together like the pieces of some grisly jigsaw puzzle.

He stood up, bottle in hand, and the scar disappeared from view beneath his hair.

In the lab, he began cutting the *parviflora* root while she gathered the rest of the equipment. His movements were as precise as ever, the translucent slices falling away evenly behind his blade. The only difference, she thought, was in his hands themselves: at school they had always been stained and discolored, especially at the fingertips. Now, although a tracery of scars remained, his hands were as pale as the rest of him.

"You have an interesting assortment of supplies," he said.

"Meaning?"

"Quite a few things I didn't recognize."

"I travel a bit."

"Collecting?"

"And studying, yes."

"Why the preponderance of exotica?"

She paused, unsure of how to make her point without giving offense, then forged ahead. "It's my observation that European wizardry is remarkably complacent and insular. Present company excepted, of course."

He turned to look at her and raised an eyebrow, but said nothing, so she continued.

"Every potions text I ever saw when I was in school was based on the so-called 'classical' materials," she said. "The stuff that European philtrists and herbalists have been working with for centuries."

He opened his mouth to speak, but she held up a hand. "Granted, with the occasional 'exotic' ingredient from India, or China. Tell me I'm wrong."

He looked amused, but said, "You are not wrong."

She waved a pipette in the direction of the French doors. "There are whole continents out there that we've just been ignoring, for hundreds of years! Have you any idea the number of botanical species in the Amazonian rainforest?"

"None whatsoever."

"I've spent ten years collecting specimens there, and haven't begun to scratch the surface. And I've never even been to Africa...who knows what's there?"

"The Africans do, I should imagine."

"Very clever, Snape. Ha ha. And is anyone asking them?"

"Not that I know of."

"And consider this...did you know that Muggles are discovering whole ecosystems in the depths of the oceans? All manner of flora and fauna that have never seen the sun, that live off the heat from thermal vents in the ocean floor?"

"I did not," he admitted. "And you think such organisms would have magical uses?"

"How could they not? Think about it...we have a whole magical pharmacopoeia developed from plants and animals found on a very small fraction of the world's surface. How likely is it that every possible magical ingredient just happened to lie within easy reach of medieval European wizards?"

"I can think of a far more important question."

"Which is?"

"Am I going to continue to do all the work here whilst you witter on about darkest Africa and the creatures living in Davy Jones's locker?"

"You were the one who asked."

"Indeed. Pass me those scales."

"All I'm saying is, there's a sodding gold mine out there, and European wizards are too snobbish and ethnocentric to explore it."

"You could be right. The scales, please."

By noon they had all the ingredients assembled, weighed, and measured. Feeling a little of her earlier nervousness returning, Hermione set a 2,000 ml Griffin beaker on the stirrer plate and filled it to the halfway mark with distilled water, then added the sliced *parviflora* and gingerroot.

Snape regarded beaker and plate silently for a moment, and then said, "I don't imagine those came from Paracelsus."

"No."

He consulted the recipe sheet, which was by now somewhat smudged. "'Two hours' humectation with gentle agitation,'" he read. "Do you have an apprentice handy, or shall we take it in turns?"

"Neither," she said, reddening slightly and dropping a stirrer bar gently into the beaker. "It's, um, an electrical device. Very simple, really...the bar has a magnet at the center, and when you turn it on..." she demonstrated "...a corresponding magnet in the plate makes the bar spin."

"And you can vary the speed?"

"Yes, with this knob. You see?"

"Ah, yes. Really quite clever." He turned to look at her. "Is something wrong, Miss Granger?"

"What? Oh, no, I was just...well, I suppose I was worried that you wouldn't approve."

"Why shouldn't I approve?"

"You know, Muggle apparatus and all. We never used anything like this at Hogwarts."

He turned his attention back to the stirrer plate, watching the mixture revolve slowly in the beaker.

"Electrical devices don't work at Hogwarts, Miss Granger. That doesn't mean I'm somehow opposed to them."

She let out a slow breath. *Fuck me, that's a relief.* "Let's leave it to stir itself, then, and go find some lunch...I'm starving. I have an intense craving for Casa Fernando's seafood-stuffed cabbage."

"Are you sure that's wise? If we're going to be testing this potion this afternoon, something a bit gentler on the stomach might be in order."

She looked at him in surprise. "You didn't think we'd be testing it on ourselves, did you?"

"I did, rather."

"Good god, no. Not for another day or two at least. We have to try it out first on Wilbur."

"And who is Wilbur, might I ask?"

She grinned. "Patience, my young Padawan. All things in their proper season. And right now it is the season for cabbage stuffed with prawns and octopus."

A/N: *Philtrist* is a word I made up, because I needed a term that meant "professional potions maker." I know that lots of fanfic writers treat "potions master" in this way...the way we use the adjective *master* in phrases like *master carpenter*...but in canon, "potions master" just means "potions teacher." *Alchemist* didn't quite suit my purposes either, since references to it in canon don't seem to include modern potion-making. So, unable to find a word to suit my purposes, I invented one. Y'all are welcome to use it. You can thank me later.

Pig Bogeys on My Jeans

Chapter 6 of 16

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Chapter 6 Pig Bogeys on My Jeans

To: Kingsley Shacklebolt, Minister for Magic

From: Severus Snape

16 September 2008

Mr Shacklebolt,

Based on my research, I have reason to believe that one or more spells may have recently appeared which provoke any or all of the following effects in the subject:

1. Loss of short-term memory whilst retaining recall of long-past events
2. Complete loss of proprioception
3. Inability to recognise faces, or confusion of faces with inanimate objects
4. Conviction that one's own body parts belong to another
5. Inability to use the hands for any practical application even though full motor control is retained
6. Loss of balance or persistent tilting of the body when upright
7. Compulsion to move one's appendages while sleeping or resting

As I mentioned in my previous report, I am hampered in my ability to investigate these issues by the Ministry's insistence on withholding crucial information. As the Ministry was ostensibly motivated to retain my services by the emergence of a number of anecdotal reports regarding new and injurious spells, it is a mystery to me what purpose is now served by the deliberate suppression of these accounts.

I must urge you to reconsider your position and inform me immediately should reports emerge of any actual occurrences of the above-hypothesised spells.

Ever yr humble servant,

Severus Snape

He watched the owl flap off into the darkness.

With any luck, Shacklebolt would have no inkling of how long it had taken him to craft the letter...nearly two hours of careful word choices, edits, and deletions, and of the substitution of demand for substance.

It was, he supposed, like riding a bicycle. Perhaps in time it would chafe less, and not make him so sore and irritable.

He wondered how soon he could return to Hermione's laboratory without exciting her suspicions, and reluctantly concluded that he would have to wait several days at the very least. He had pushed, as hard as he dared, for human trials of the Invisibility Potion (for which, naturally, his presence would be required).

Far from being *Homo sapiens*, Wilbur had turned out to be an intimidatingly robust specimen of *Sus scrofa domestica*, wearing a red bandana tied about its neck.

"A pig, Miss Granger? You test your potions on a pig?"

"Rather him than me. Cast a Muggle-repelling charm, would you? It won't do to have the neighbors see him vanish into thin air," she said, climbing over the stile.

He waited while she retrieved a plastic bowl from a corner of the pen and knocked it against the fence to empty it.

"Right, then," she said to Snape. "Five drams of potion in one pint of milk." And to the pig: "Get back, you greedy thing."

He measured out the quantities and handed the mixture across to her. "Not really best research practice, you know, mixing it with milk like this."

"Did you want to hold him, then, while I pour it down his throat? I thought not. *Geback*, Wilbur! Now look what you've done...you've got pig bogeys on my jeans." She looked up at Snape. "Ready?"

He nodded, thumb poised over his watch. "Go."

She poured the milk into the bowl and they both watched as Wilbur slurped it down. Nothing happened at first, and Hermione squatted down beside the pig and scratched him gently between the ears.

"There!" said Snape. "It's starting. Seven seconds."

The pig seemed to dissolve from the inside out, fading rapidly from view until the bandana hung suspended in apparently empty air.

"Shit," said Hermione.

"Something wrong?"

"I can still see his feet."

"Really?" Snape craned forward, peering into the mud, and realized she was right: there were four black cloven hooves just barely visible in the afternoon sunlight.

"Maybe we didn't get the dosage exactly right," she said. "Let's give him another dram and see what happens."

It was fascinating to watch the invisible pig drinking the second portion of milk: the liquid rose from the bowl in a fitful stream, only to vanish immediately.

"Disappears as soon as it's swallowed," said Snape. "I wonder . . ."

Hermione held up a hand. "Don't even go there. It's too disgusting."

"I suppose you're right."

"Look," she said. "His feet have gone."

"So they have. It was just the dosage, then."

The disembodied red bandana began to move about the pigsty, Wilbur having evidently lost interest in the empty bowl.

"Damn it," said Hermione. "I can still see him."

Snape squinted at the area around the bandana. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's just a kind of grainy outline, but it's definitely there."

He saw it then: a diaphanous pig-shaped shell, slightly more substantial around the hooves and snout. *How very odd . . .*

"Dirt!" he cried, and the ghost-pig startled and trotted off to a corner of the pen.

"What?"

"Dirt," he repeated. "It's not the pig that's visible, it's the dirt on his skin."

"You know, I believe you're right." She laughed. "That's easily enough remedied. *Aguamenti!*"

A stream of water poured out of her wand and splashed onto the phantom pig, who began galloping vigorously about the pigsty.

"Doesn't seem too fond of his bath," said Snape.

"What did you expect? He's a pig."

The stream of water ended, and there was a sudden explosion of droplets.

"Shakes himself like a dog, doesn't he?"

"So it would seem."

"Hard luck for him, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"Being your experimental subject. I'm guessing this isn't the first potion you've tested on him. I think I might be a bit resentful if I were your pig."

She snorted. "Grateful is what he ought to be."

"And why is that?"

"If it weren't for me, he'd be dead. I got him from Fernando...he raises a couple of litters every spring for the restaurant."

"So you saved him from ending up as trotters?"

"Not even that. Fernando was going to drown him when he was a few days old...he was a runt, destined apparently to be shoved off the teat until he starved. Hence the name 'Wilbur.'"

"I'm afraid I don't follow."

She peered at him. "You were never actually a child at all, were you?"

"That remark fails to shed any light on the pig's name, I must say."

"Never mind. At any rate, I took him, and raised him, and now he earns his keep testing potions for me."

"And for this he should be grateful?"

"Of course he should. He's alive, isn't he?"

"You seem to assume that any existence is preferable to none, Miss Granger."

"Well, short of abject misery, yes."

"More fool you, then," he said with sudden bitterness.

She was looking intently at him. "Are you suggesting," she said slowly, "that he would be better off dead?"

"Quite possibly. You would have to ask him."

She turned her attention back to Wilbur, now discernible only as a faint porciform sheen of moisture.

"That may yet come to pass," she said. "I've got to figure out something to do with him. He's getting too big to manage, and a few of the neighbors have started to look at him with a glint in their eye. Every time I come home from a trip I expect to find that someone's made him into chops in my absence."

"They might find him very oddly flavored, after all that potions testing."

She grinned. "Serve them right for poaching."

Some hours later, after the pig had fully rematerialized, they returned to the lab, where Hermione began decanting the remaining potion into bottles.

Snape picked one up, read the label, and looked a question at her.

"Until I decide to market it, I give it a code name."

"But 'Love Potion No. 9?'"

"My Aunt Jean. She's from the sixties. She used to sing me all manner of weird things when she came to visit."

He had been fully prepared to return the next day and continue testing, but she demurred, insisting instead that she had to spend the next few days filling orders. "I have a very strict schedule when I'm not traveling. Mondays and Tuesdays are for research; Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays are for serving mammon."

Mammon in this case was represented by a long list pinned to the storeroom door: several dozen entries including items like *Bld rplnsh ptn 7gal...Hosp Sta Dimpna* and *Eqn vrmifg 12 oz...F G Hernández, Los Cabos*. He ran his finger down the list and stopped over *Plyjc base 15 units...Salamanca distr.*

"Polyjuice potion, Miss Granger?"

He saw her guard go up slightly. *Tread carefully.*

"Just the base...I leave the final ingredient up to the client."

"Still a Ministry-regulated substance," he said mildly.

"Not in Spain."

"Ah." He briefly considered offering to come and help her, but discarded the idea almost immediately: best not to seem too eager.

Or to appear to have too much time on his hands. "I should be getting back," he said. "I have a monograph to finish."

"Thanks for your help today," she said, and held out her hand.

He took it and pressed it briefly. It was warm, and dry, and small. "A pleasure."

Now, sitting in his room with a cigarette and a glass of port, he thought about the feel of her hand in his, and about the name and address written on the scrap of parchment now tucked away in his dresser drawer.

He would wait until Sunday, he decided, to contact her again. In the meantime, there was work to be done.

A/N: 50 points each to the Houses of the reviewers who guessed that Wilbur would turn out to be a pig. And love and kisses to my fabulous beta/Britpick team, corianderpie and exartemarte.

The various neurological dysfunctions were adapted from Oliver Sacks' wonderful *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*. All except for Restless Leg Syndrome, which I got off the telly.

Santa Dimpna is my Spanish version of St Mungo's.

Oh, and if *porciform* isn't really a word, well, it ought to be, so there. Readers are going to just have to get used to my habit of dragging the English language out behind the barn for a quick shag.

A Most Convincing Liar

Chapter 7 of 16

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Chapter 7 A Most Convincing Liar

Hermione climbed the steep stairs and emerged through the trap door, using one hand to steady herself against the edge of the aperture and the other to clutch the crock of lacewing flies. In the light of the storeroom...for the cellar was quite dark, and she hadn't a hand to spare for her wand or a torch...she read the date scribbled on the side of the crock in chinagraph pencil: 27.8.08.

Perfect. She set the crock on the floor and swung herself up after it, then closed the trap door. She supposed she could have cast a Stasis Charm and waited another couple of days to brew the Polyjuice, but there were suppliers and rent to be paid, and her innate sense of order to be placated. Best to do things on schedule.

It would be nice to have an assistant of Snape's caliber, though, for an order of this volume."Assistant," *Hermione? Who are you kidding?* All right, not an assistant. A mentor? No. A partner, then.

She had laid out the rest of the potion ingredients on the table before bringing up the stewed lacewings, and now set about chopping, grating, weighing, and measuring. She wound three whole boomslang skins into the food processor, pausing to admire the pale green-and-grey checkered pattern before pressing the button briefly and reducing them to shreds. *I wonder what Snape would think of this device,* she thought. *He would have to admit that it beats the hell out of all that tedious slicing we used to do.*

She let herself imagine for a moment what it would be like to work alongside him on a more regular basis. She liked working alone, and had guarded her privacy fiercely over the years. As convenient as it might have been to bring in a partner when the orders were coming thick and fast, she liked being free to come and go as she pleased, and hated the thought of having to make small talk as she worked. In that regard, at least, Snape would be an ideal colleague: he was less likely than anyone she knew to make vapid social conversation. She doubted he even knew how.

Bicorn horn next: this went into a small coffee grinder more suited than the food processor to handling small, very hard objects. Both appliances operated under a permanent Muffliato Charm that allowed her to use them without disturbing the quiet of the laboratory: the grinder, in particular, otherwise made a loud high-pitched whine that put her in mind of an outraged mandrake.

So, no egregious noises from machines or colleagues . . . but if she was being completely honest, that was...by far...not the biggest obstacle to her taking on a partner. Neville Longbottom, for instance, could certainly have been counted on not to natter on unnecessarily, and he was a dab hand at herbology, which had never been her strong suit. But Neville was Gryffindor to the core, as straight as an arrow, and would have balked immediately at the first hint of any sort of dubious undertaking.

And "dubious" applied to a good two-thirds of the transactions that paid her rent.

The notorious laxity of the Spanish *Ministerio de magia* allowed her to run her business unmolested here in Spain, but she was well aware that much of her custom came from Britain and involved materials and enchantments that were carefully controlled there, if not banned outright.

While this did not bother her in the slightest, she knew Neville would never stand for it.

Snape, on the other hand . . .

Of course, this little fantasy that she was having took as a given that he would be available, not to mention willing. He had offered no explanation for his presence in Salamanca. She had no idea how he was occupying his newly liberated self, or whether...more to the point...he would want to spend any time at all in her presence.

There. That's the crux of it, isn't it?

She had felt, the whole time he was here, the oppressive presence of their shared history. Had kept waiting, expecting him to say something, anything. And the closest he had come to mentioning it at all had been that bitter comment about Wilbur's being better off dead.

What did you expect, you silly cow? Gratitude? From Snape?

No, not gratitude...and a good thing, too, as that was clearly not on offer...but at least perhaps some acknowledgment. A little nod in the direction of the intersection of their paths.

There was a tap at the French doors and she looked up to see a spectacled owl settling onto the railing and casting a darkly covetous glance at Tuppenny in her cage. She fed it a bit of ham instead, and sat down to read...not without some difficulty, as her Portuguese was limited...the letter it had brought.

16 de Setembro de 2008

Querida Hermione,

Tenho boas e más notícias, como dizem.

Encontrei alguém que diz que ouviu falar da planta da língua mentirosa e sabe onde ela pode ser encontrada - na vila onde a família dele mora. O nome dele é Moacir, e se você estiver interessada, ele estaria disposto (por uma taxa, é claro) a levá-la até lá e servir como intermediário.

É aí que as coisas ficam um pouco complicadas. Para começar, o local da vila é bem remoto, quase na fronteira com a Venezuela. Você teria que voar até Manaus e de lá pegar um barco e subir uns 500 km pelo Rio Negro.

Amiga, eu sei que você já fez várias dessas viagens na última década, mas quero deixar claro que Macondo é mais no interior do que você jamais foi antes. Ainda mais importante que isso, eu não poderei ir com você como faço sempre, já que a Luzia está próxima de dar a luz e esta tem sido uma gravidez bem complicada.

Esse Moacir parece um cara legal, e todos falam bem dele, mas não posso dizer que estou cem por cento confortável em mandá-la para o interior sozinha com ele. Ele não é bruxo, embora como todos os índios, ele está familiarizado com magia e não fica surpreso com isso. Eu lhe pediria encarecidamente para trazer alguém com você - uma bruxa ou um bruxo capaz em quem você possa confiar.

Acho que essa excursão levaria no mínimo umas três semanas. Moacir está pedindo R\$ 75,00 por dia, cerca de 30, mas eu acho que ele faria o trabalho pela metade do preço. Você deve conseguir alugar um barco com motor em Manaus por uns R\$ 50,00 (20). Certifique-se de que o barco seja alugado em seu nome e não no do Moacir. Um bom quarto de hotel em Manaus irá custar próximo de R\$ 250,00 (100). Traga as coisas para acampar, já que quando deixarem Manaus não haverá mais nada no sentido de hospedagem!

Você também precisará de alguma coisa para trocar pelas plantas quando chegar em Macondo; dinheiro não vai ser muito útil lá.

Se ainda tiver certeza de que quer ir, me mande as datas e eu cuidarei dos detalhes.

Abraços,

Gabriel

Her pulse quickened as she read the first paragraph. So the *língua mentirosa* vine really did exist!

Bla, bla, bla, five hundred kilometers up the Rio Negro, bla, bla, Luz is about to have her baby, bla, bla . . . oh shit.

Oh. Shit.

And where, pray tell, was she to procure *uma bruxa ou um bruxo capaz*, much less one in whom she could *confiar*?

The answer was in her mind almost before the question formed itself, and she snatched up quill and parchment, determined to have done with it before she lost her nerve.

17 September 2008

Dear Snape (this seemed the least awkward of the possible ways she might address him),

I wonder if you would be interested in accompanying me on a materials-gathering expedition.

The object of the search is a plant I believe to exist in the Brazilian rainforest. For reasons you may guess, I'd prefer not to discuss its properties in this letter; suffice it to say that it could prove a very valuable addition to the herbamentarium.

I have a contact in Brazil...a reliable wizard with whom I've worked for many years...who has located a source of this plant, and a guide who can take me there and facilitate negotiations. In the past, Gabriel has always accompanied me on these expeditions, but this time for personal reasons he cannot. Because of the remoteness of the location, and the fact that Moacir, the guide, is not well known to him, he has urged me in the strongest possible terms to find a suitable colleague with whom to travel.

Would you be interested in going with me? I would of course cover all your expenses.

Regards,

H Granger

She sent the owl off with the letter, and then did her best to put the matter out of her mind while she concentrated on finishing the Polyjuice. If she was to be gone for three weeks, she would need to have all her current orders filled before she left, and the list pinned to the storeroom door seemed suddenly intimidatingly long.

It had been dark out for several hours when she finished the potion, and there had still been no reply to her owl. The more she thought about it, the more embarrassed she felt...it had been hugely presumptuous to ask him such a thing on the basis of one day's companionable work. What had she been thinking? She began to imagine all the different sarcastic and belittling forms his answer might take, all the scathing turns of phrase he might use to cut her down to size.

Or perhaps he would simply not reply at all, and she would spend the next week in this awful state of speculation, her mercilessly comprehensive memory dredging up every humiliating incident, every cutting remark from her years at Hogwarts.

I am a bloody great idiot.

There was a tap at the French doors, and she looked up, hoping the owl had returned with some kind of answer to put her out of her misery.

There was no owl. What there was, was Snape himself, robed this time against the cool night breeze, his cloak and hair looking indigo in the moonlight.

Fuck.

She crossed and opened the door, and he entered in a swirl of robes. Hermione's throat constricted painfully...this was not yesterday's shirtsleeved and agreeable colleague. This was full-strength, undiluted Professor scare-the-shit-out-of-you Snape.

Fuck fuckitty fuck fuck FUCK.

"Do you mind if I sit?" he asked, and she realized she was standing and gawking like a first-year.

"Oh, no, yes, please do, I...I'll make some tea."

"I could do with something stronger, if you have it."

Gods, so could I. "Whisky. Yes." Brilliant, Hermione: from babbling to monosyllabic in thirty seconds.

While she was pouring, he brought out the letter from his pocket.

"So tell me about this plant."

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *No babbling. He's not going to bite you.*

"It's called *lingua mentirosa*: 'lying tongue.' I first heard of it a few months ago."

"And what does it do that's so sensitive you can't put it in a letter?"

She blushed slightly. "Supposedly it makes you a most convincing liar. It has a reputation as a drug of seduction."

She saw the beginnings of a smile. "And whom were you planning to seduce, Miss Granger?"

"No one, I'm not...god, no! That's not...I mean...I wasn't planning on using it to seduce anyone."

So much for no babbling. She took another deep breath. "I was thinking it could be used to brew an antidote for Veritaserum."

He set his glass down gently on the table. "That," he said, "is a very interesting possibility."

"Yes."

"And potentially quite lucrative."

A wild impulse seized her, and the words were out before she could stop them. "I'll split the profits with you."

"Done," he said.

A/N: In addition to the usual effusive praise for my beta/Britpick team of corianderpie and exartemarte, extra super-special thanks are due this chapter to ferporcel for her help with the Portuguese

It's Hot Where We're Going

Chapter 8 of 16

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Chapter 8 It's Hot Where We're Going

"Done," he said, and waited.

A dozen urgent questions and admonitions were jangling in his brain, but he waited. With Hermione Granger, he recalled, one had only to remain mute, and before long she would commence prattling on frenetically about anything that popped into her head.

He felt it always helped to be a bit intimidating, so he settled back in his chair and fixed her with an unwavering but languid gaze, letting his eyelids droop to half-mast, and taking another sip of her unremarkable whisky. Soon there would be a flood of information, and he could simply sift through it to find the answers to his questions without giving away the direction of his interest.

"That's settled, then," she said, and astonished him by lapsing into silence.

Finally he asked, "When were you thinking of going?"

"Not for another month at least. I have orders to fill before I can leave."

He looked around the lab at the evidence of her recent activity and said, "Perhaps I can help you with those."

"Oh," she said. "That would be brilliant. Thanks."

Another long silence.

God damn it, there were things he needed to *know*. He closed his eyes and began ticking them off.

First and foremost: did she have any idea of the explosive potential of a perdurable liars' potion, or did she think this was just another product she could add to the high end of her catalogue?

A close second: how the *fuck* was he going to manage traveling to the ends of the Earth without tipping his hand to the Ministry?

And somewhere around third or fourth: how primitive was this trek into the jungle likely to get, and was there any chance it would provide him with an opportunity to get into Hermione Granger's knickers?

"Shorts," she said.

His eyes flew open. "I beg your pardon?"

"You're going to need shorts. It's hot where we're going."

His pulse began to return to normal. "I do not own a pair of shorts, Miss Granger, and I am not about to acquire any."

"Suit yourself," she said, opening a drawer and withdrawing parchment and quill.

Years of spying had made the surreptitious reading of upside-down documents second nature to Snape, and he watched as she wrote and underlined *To do before leaving*.

Hermione Granger, Marshall of the Lists, he thought with amusement.

She wrote *expand tent*, and asked, "Are you any good at transfiguration?"

He fixed her with a withering look.

"Oh, right, of course you are. I've got a tent...Arthur Weasley hooked me up with an excellent praetorist...but it's only got one bedroom. I could send it back and have it modified, but I don't know how long that would take. Do you think you could add a room to it?"

"I don't think that would be beyond my capabilities."

She wrote *Snape* to the right of the list entry, then added another item: *barter*.

"Gabriel says I need to bring things to trade for the *lingua mentirosa* vine, and I was thinking the Invisibility Potion might work for that. Which would mean we'd need to run human trials...are you up for that?"

"Certainly."

"We'll begin with those tomorrow, then. And we'll need to start a large batch of Veritaserum straight away if we mean to begin developing the antidote as soon as we get back." She pushed a sheet of parchment across to him and pulled a second quill from the drawer. "Check the storeroom for ingredients and see if we need to order anything."

"I might have known it would come naturally to you."

"What?"

"Bossing people about."

"Up yours." She gave him an exasperated look. "I was under the impression that you wanted to help. I'm just being efficient."

"Right." He jotted down a list, then rose and crossed to the little storeroom. A light came on as soon as he opened the door...a nicety he hadn't noticed before...and he scanned the shelves with a practiced eye. Most of the bottles, jars, and packets, he noted, were arranged in alphabetical order beginning on the bottom shelf, with a separate, warded section for hazardous ingredients. Whereas before the presence of a large number of exotic materials had captured his attention, now the careful ordering of the various containers caused him to realize that there were significant gaps in her collection. On the first shelf alone he noticed the absence of several ingredients he would have considered staples in the most elementary potions laboratory.

He stuck his head out the door of the storeroom. "Haven't you got any bloodroot?"

"Perishables in the cellar," she said, without looking up from her writing. "Through the trap."

Wandlight revealed the cellar shelves to be just as neat, clean, and well organized as those above. *Full marks, Miss Granger*, he thought, and allowed himself a satisfied smirk. *Someone taught you well*. Here were all the missing stores, and then some: roots, live cultures, trays of cultivated mushrooms, flasks of fermenting liquids with dates written on them in her neat script. And on the wall behind the ladder, a collection of seventy or eighty bottles of wine.

He was back in the laboratory and had passed the checklist over to her before it occurred to him that he had not seen, either above- or belowground, yesterday's dozen or so vials of "Love Potion No. 9." He resolved to make a more thorough inspection of both levels at the next opportunity.

The list on her parchment had grown substantially, and now comprised three columns: *Travel Arrangements, Materials, and Orders*. Items in this last column were all marked with one of two sets of initials: *HJG* or *SSB*. While he watched, she drew her wand down the column, lifting about half the entries and transferring them to another sheet. This she pushed across the table to him, and asked, "Do you think you could handle these?"

Her eyes were fixed steadily on him, and he had the distinct and uneasy feeling that he was being tested. He therefore bit back the dismissive rejoinder that had come automatically to his lips, and looked seriously at the list in front of him.

It contained all of the potions she had marked *SSB*. He understood suddenly that *HJG* were her own initials, and wondered what the *B* at the end of his could stand for. *Bastard?* he thought wryly. *Berk? Barmpot?*

Ah, well, he would puzzle that out later. For now, he made a cursory scan of the items on the list and said, "These are all banned or controlled in the UK."

"Yes," she said neutrally, still looking at him with that assessing gaze. "Is that a problem?"

It was a test, then.

"Not especially."

He thought saw her relax slightly.

"I have two product lines. The more innocuous materials go out under my own name...healing potions I sell to hospitals, veterinary products for the local farmers, that sort of thing."

She paused and took a card from the drawer and handed it to him.

"The more . . . sensitive items are produced under this label, and go through a distributor."

It was a simple, conservative business card, but without any sort of address or contact information. There was a picture of a vial, and some leaves, and the words *Silken Shoal Backwater*, and that was all.

Silken Shoal Backwater . . . SSB. That explained the initials, although the significance of the name remained a mystery. A reference to the village she was living in, perhaps?

He felt something bump against his ankle and looked down to see a large, flat-faced orange cat rubbing against his trouser leg.

"Leave me alone, you revolting creature," he said. And to Hermione: "Looking a bit moth-eaten, isn't he?"

"And fat, but he's old as Methuselah, so I reckon he's entitled."

"You oughtn't to allow him in here, you know. He'll contaminate everything."

"I'll have you know he's a very clean cat."

"If memory serves, you had a rather unpleasant experience with cat-hair contamination whilst you were at Hogwarts, from which you appear to have learned nothing."

She reddened. "I was a very inexperienced potion-maker at the time."

He looked down at the cat. "Scram," he said, in his most threatening hiss.

Crookshanks regarded him sleepily and began rubbing his head against Snape's ankle.

"Obedient little git, isn't he?"

"That, too," she said. "I'll shut him outside tomorrow while we're working, if he bothers you so much."

"It's not that he bothers me, Miss Granger, it's that it's substandard laboratory procedure to have some filthy beast wandering around shedding hair and dander and who knows what else whilst one is conducting delicate and precise brewing processes."

"I've said I'll put him out," she said crossly. "And now if you don't mind, it's quite late and I've had a very busy day."

A/N: Many, many thanks to my beta/Britpick team, corianderpie and exartemarte.

This chapter contains another made-up word, *praetorist*, which I coined to mean a maker of magical tents. Perhaps I'll compile a little glossary and send it on to JKR in case she really *is* considering number eight. I'm sure she'd be ever so grateful.

Remember to Breathe

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Chapter 9 Remember to Breathe

Hermione had already compiled another list...this one labeled *Testable Parameters*...with two columns: *Subject* and *Observer*.

"Sounds," she began. "So far, with the animals, once they've had the potion I've not heard a squeak from either of them. But I wonder about causing noises with an object...how far does the magic extend?"

"Throwing something, you mean? Or opening a door, that sort of thing?"

"Or striking one object with another," she said, gesturing to a heterogeneous collection laid out on the table which included, among other things, a tuning fork, a small hammer, and a bottle of vanilla extract.

He picked up the bottle, and she said, "I've been wondering about smells...what makes them indiscernable, and at what distance from the body do they remain undetected? I mean, if you stop and think about it, odors are actually tiny particulate matter."

"Believe me, I have thought about it. Pondered it, even, whilst sharing the Slytherin common room with a horde of flatulent adolescent males."

She grimaced. "I think I'll stick with the vanilla as a test medium, if you don't mind. Unless . . ." She leaned toward him and sniffed gently. "What is that, vetiver?"

"Vetiver, and a very small amount of bergamot."

"You make your own soap?"

"I do."

"It's very nice. But the trouble is, that odor's already in the air, isn't it? I won't be able to tell if I'm smelling you at the moment, or if it's left over from before you took the potion. Better use the vanilla...the bottle's enclosed in a *Continere* charm."

"You seem to be assuming that I will be the one taking the potion in this little trial."

She looked ceilingward in a parody of innocence. "Well, it *would* be the gentlemanly thing to do."

"Miss Granger, in what universe did you imagine me to be a gentleman?" He took a Galleon coin from his pocket. "We'll toss for it, shall we?"

"We shall not. If you think I trust you not to cheat at a coin-toss, you're mad."

"What then?"

"I notice you don't bother pretending to be insulted." She held up a fist. "Paper-scissors-stone."

"I've no idea what you're talking about."

"You sprang fully formed from the head of Zeus, didn't you?"

"Were that the case, I would have no umbilicus, and I assure you that I do. But what's all this in aid of?"

"Childhood, comma, my growing conviction that you had none."

"Perhaps I simply didn't waste mine on frivolities like paper-scissors-stone, whatever that is."

"It's a choosing game, but I suspect that teaching it to you would just be an invitation to more verbal abuse. I'll show you how to *domorra* instead; it's quicker."

"This conversation has already taken longer than any number of coin tosses."

She held up her hand again. "It's quite simple: on the count of three, you hold out your hand with several of your fingers extended, and then we add up the total. Do you want odds or evens?"

"Odds."

"Of course you do. Ready? *Un, dos, tres, ¡ya!*"

She held up two fingers; Snape held up four.

"Ha!" She grinned smugly. "You're the guinea pig, then."

"So it would seem."

She turned back to her list. "Sound, smell, vision, touch. We know from Wilbur's reactions that he could hear your voice, and feel the water when it hit him, and presumably smell and taste the milk in the second dose. But I'm very curious to know whether those senses are at all modified or blunted."

"Duly noted."

"I've also got a couple of items that I've just written down as they occurred to me. What about sweat, for instance?"

"You mean, does the subject perspire? Why should that be affected?"

"No, I mean, if the subject perspires, is the moisture visible to the observer? Because if it is, we'll need to add an anticholinergic agent to the potion base. Silverbush seed, maybe."

He shook his head. "Not with the emetic properties of the *Carica parviflora* already a problem. Have you got Egyptian henbane?"

"A little, I think."

"That would be better. It has an antispasmodic effect as well."

She made a note in the page margin. "And breath. Will I feel it if you breathe or blow on me?"

"I'll try to remember to breathe."

She pipetted a careful amount of the potion into a diminutive beaker and handed it to him with a smirk. "Off you go, then. There's a loo just over there, the door to the right of the storeroom."

"I don't really expect it to make me violently sick, do you? Your pig didn't seem to feel any ill effects."

"Not for getting sick in, for taking off your clothes." At the look on his face, she said, "You were planning to test this potion fully dressed?"

"I was, yes."

"Really, Snape, how scientific would that be? Plus I don't believe for a second that you'd have entertained the idea if I'd been the one to lose the toss."

She had him there.

"Tell you what," she said. "You can keep your underwear on if you'd rather. I don't think it will compromise the study too much."

He was on the point of agreeing when he remembered the guinea pig's form under the tented cloth napkin. "No, in for a Sickle, in for a Galleon," he said dryly, and picked up the little beaker along with the bottle of vanilla extract.

In the lavatory he stripped down quickly, somewhat grateful that the only mirror was a small one above the washbasin. He hung his watch by its chain on a towel-hook, pressed the button to start the timer, and drank the potion down.

It wasn't too bad; slightly bitter, but not unbearably so, and he felt no immediate nausea, only a spreading warmth as it descended his gullet.

That was the extent of the change, however: after allowing two full minutes to pass, he was dismayed to find himself as opaque as before. They had calculated the dosage based on body weight, but apparently humans were going to need a stronger dose than pigs.

He stuck his head out the door. "Miss Granger," he called, "would you bring me a second dose, please?"

She was bent over the table with her back to him, writing on the parchment. When she didn't answer, he called again in a louder voice; still no response. Damn the girl, was she deaf? He would just have to fetch it himself.

Going back to retrieve his clothes, he passed the small mirror and was brought up short when he realized that it had shown no reflection as he walked by. He held his hand up in front of his face and found it as substantial as ever, but when he placed it against the mirror, no reciprocal image appeared there.

I am invisible, he thought, but only to others. I can still see myself. And that would account for Hermione's failure to answer him, he realized: he could hear his own voice, but she could not.

He opened the bottle of vanilla extract and dabbed a bit on his arm, inhaling the rich, sweet smell. Nothing wrong with that sense either, then.

Stepping out of the lavatory, he banged the door sharply behind him. Hermione jumped, then whirled round with a broad grin on her face.

"That's one question answered," she said, and turned to scribble a note.

And another as well, thought Snape. I can hear her as plain as anything.

She was looking directly at him, but as he moved toward her, her eyes did not follow him. It was a little disconcerting, to tell the truth, especially as he could clearly see...and feel...his own nakedness as he approached her.

He brought his hand down with a sharp *crack!* on the tabletop next to her. When she didn't react, he picked up the tuning fork and struck the edge of the table with it. The *pinngg!* got her attention immediately, and she turned to face him, reaching out a hand in front of her.

He leaned over and pulled the parchment toward him, then picked up the quill and made a tick mark in the *Subject* column next to *can see?* and another next to *can hear?* and added, *can pick up and manipulate objects.*

She was feeling tentatively in front of her at chest height. "You're absolutely invisible to me," she said, squinting a little. "Not a hair, not a flake of dead skin, nothing. And I couldn't hear you walking over here at all."

He could sense the excitement rising in her voice. "Fuck me, this is brilliant. This is going to be worth a fortune. Absolutely one hundred percent infuckingvisible."

She sniffed the air in front of him. "I can't smell anything, either. Did you put the vanilla on? You must have done, surely."

Her hand came in contact with his arm, and he stood perfectly still, realizing abruptly how bizarrely erotic his situation was.

She was prattling on, a rapid-fire monologue that he guessed must be *hermodus operandi* when working by herself in the lab. "How long has it been now? Fifteen minutes? I wonder what would happen if I cut off a bit of hair...would it show up right away, or would the potion have to wear off there as well?"

She prodded his arm with a finger. "It feels almost spongy...the resistance isn't there all at once. Just the harder you push, the more resistance there is. And there's no warmth at all."

Oh, there's warmth, all right.

"What about earrings, I wonder? Or body piercings? Would the part that was under the flesh be visible? And what about things like steel pins and artificial joints? Prosthetic heart valves? What if you swallowed something like a marble? Or something organic like a bone, would that make a difference?"

She seemed to have completely lost awareness of his nakedness, her mind haring off down a dozen rabbit trails in rapid succession. She poked at his arm again, then laid her other hand flat against his chest. "It's like touching something while wearing a pair of heavy eelskin work gloves," she said. "Or pushing opposite magnets together."

That wasn't how it felt on the receiving end. He could see her hands on his skin, and was exquisitely sensible of every detail of their surface as they touched him: warm, dry, gentle, but insistently probing and exploring.

Christ almighty.

His libido, roused finally from its years of dormancy, roared into life and screamed *What are you waiting for, you fool!?*

Somehow her obliviousness made it more, rather than less, arousing. Her hands moved over his chest matter-of-factly, and then she brought her face in close to sniff at him.

He bent his head over hers and could smell the faint traces of her shampoo. Something sweet and light: jasmine, perhaps. Or frangipani.

His cock was fully awake now, clamoring for attention. *Hard as Chinese arithmancy.* In fact, if she stood any closer, it was going to poke her.

He reached down with his free hand and pinioned it against his belly. "Would you excuse me for a moment?" he asked *Just for a second. I need to mentally recite all of Golpalott's laws and their corollaries. Backwards.*

She appeared not to have heard him...and of course in fact she hadn't.

He could say anything he liked.

"I want to fuck you," he said, and his cock leapt in his hand.

Perhaps if he kept his movements subtle, he could . . . he could . . . *Oh sweet Nimue.*

Her hands continued to pat down his upper body as if frisking him for hidden weapons, and he began tentatively to stroke his cock, senses vigilant for any indication that she was aware of what he was doing.

There was none. No pause in the methodical movement of her hands as they worked their way across his shoulders, up his neck, into his hair; no stutter in the stream-of-consciousness narrative that was now so close he could feel the moisture, smell the toothpaste she had used that morning.

Too close. Distracted or not, she would tumble to what he was doing if he didn't put some distance between them. He stepped back from her, and her hands closed briefly on the empty air.

He looked directly at her, his movements quickening. "I want to fuck you," he said again, bolder now. "I want to grab your arse in both hands and bury my cock in you over and over until you scream." Ah, god, he was close, so close...

"Are you sweating, I wonder? Because I'm looking really closely and I don't see any sweat."

He froze, transfixed by the sudden realization that when he ejaculated, the semen might be visible to her.

But it was too late, he was too far gone, he was not going to stop, he was damned if he would stop, it was too good, and it had been too long...

In a few swift, desperate strides he was out the French doors and onto the little balcony, leaping over the railing on the uphill side to the ground just a few feet below. Where he stood, cock in hand, and shouted *OhfuckohfuckohFUCK!* as he thrust forward into the empty air.

He had taken a moment to catch his breath and climbed back over the railing before he realized his mistake.

The house's enter-me-not wards would still be in place...he had watched her reactivate them earlier that morning after letting him in. So now he was locked out, standing stark naked on her balcony, with perhaps another hour of invisibility left him, and that only if he turned out to metabolize the potion at the same rate as a bloody swine.

He looked about for something with which to tap on the glass, but the only object on the balcony was the cage with the guinea pig in it; he would have to climb back down and find a stick or pebble. And come up with a good explanation for what he had been doing out onto the balcony in the first place.

Still, it had been worth it.

Without any real hope of success, he extended his arm into the aperture presented by the open door, and felt no resistance at all. Holding his breath, he walked forward, and...to his utter amazement...stepped through the doorway into the lab as if there were no obstacle at all.

Hermione was standing with her back to him, scribbling notes on the parchment. He returned to the table and struck it once more with the tuning fork, then took the quill from her and wrote:

I'm going to get dressed now

She read the note and nodded. "I'll make some tea if you like."

Excellent

Fucking hell, yes, it had been worth it.

A/N: Thanks to my wonderful beta/Britpick team, corianderpie and exartemarte.

Please Don't Touch That

Chapter 10 of 16

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Chapter 10 Please Don't Touch That

The screaming eventually woke her, as it nearly always did.

Her eyes blinked open, the echo of the hysterical shrieking as real in her ears as if her mother had been there in the room with her.

The dream had been the same, the details as precise and unvarying as if played back in a Pensieve. She was lying on her back, unable to see or move, her arms pinned out to either side. Low-pitched voices floated in the space above her.

Why is she in those restraints?

To stop her pulling off her bandages.

Is she unconscious?

She's sedated, Mr Granger. We'll keep her asleep until the Healers have finished their work on her face. It's better that way.

What happened to her?

We're not sure.

You're not sure? How can you not be sure?

Mr Granger . . . you must understand. No one brought her here. She was one of hundreds of patients that simply appeared here in the space of a few hours, many in much worse condition than your daughter. It seems to have been some sort of corrosive curse. There was a great deal of injury to the lower right side of her face .

What injury, exactly?

There was a large area of damaged tissue that had to be cleaned away, including most of the right side of the mandible...that's the jawbone. And part of the...

I know what a mandible is. I'm a dentist. What else?

Well. There was extensive damage to the mandible, as I mentioned, and to the maxilla as well. There was a large area of necrosis involving that side of the orbicularis oris, as well as the caninus, zygomaticus, triangulari, buccinator, and masseter muscles.

The masseter? As deep as that?

I'm afraid so. Whatever that spell was, it was a powerful one. Or it may have been a potion, though that seems unlikely, given the asymmetrical nature of her injuries. There's some pharyngeal damage, but we think the vocal folds are unharmed.

What about the nerves?

Considerable damage to the facial nerve, of course, and to the maxillar and mandibular divisions of the trigeminal.

Dear God.

Really, you mustn't worry, Mr Granger. She's being treated by the best reconstructive Healers in England, and when they've finished you'll barely be able to tell she was ever injured. The whole process will take...oh, Mrs Granger, please don't touch that.

Don't worry, I'm not going to contaminate anything, I just want to have a l...

And then the screaming had begun.

Hermione lay in bed, waiting for her galloping heart to return to its normal rhythm, and wished again that Arthur Weasley, crazed with grief and evidently desperate for something to occupy his mind, had not been quite so diligent in tracking down her parents and restoring their memories. It seemed pointlessly cruel...when she had not even been sentient enough to take any comfort from their presence...to subject them to the horrifying spectacle of her ravaged face. She had always known Arthur to be a kind man, but in her darker moments she wondered if he had been punishing them for her survival.

She got out of bed and pulled on a dressing gown and slippers. With this dream there was nothing for it but to get completely awake; otherwise she'd just go back and dream it again.

In her study she poured two fingers of whisky into a tumbler and sat reading through the notes that Snape had written out. The first two pages read like one side of a bizarre chatroom conversation...questions and comments he had made while still voiceless and invisible. It had felt very odd, answering the written questions aloud, but not nearly as odd as it had felt to sit drinking tea across from his seemingly empty clothes.

The pitcher had poured milk into his cup, and a teaspoon had risen and stirred it with one economical motion, then set itself down against the saucer. Hermione had seen her share of magically animated objects, but there was something about the empty shirt and trousers that had given her gooseflesh. She could see the faint darkening left by the day's sweat and dirt on the inner surface of the collar and cuffs, and it seemed weirdly and inappropriately intimate to be able to see inside his clothing.

When they had been negotiating over the coin toss, she had felt completely relaxed with him, able even to tease a little. In the space of a few days they had developed a working relationship that had felt just a tiny bit like her now-dead friendship with Ron and Harry had felt a decade ago: an easy companionship whose idiom was gentle insult, in which sarcasm was the currency of familiarity rather than a weapon.

But over tea a portion of her earlier awkwardness had returned, and the idea of conducting a one-sided conversation with his invisible presence had seemed suddenly impossible. She had been all right...had been more than all right...when there was scientific investigation to be done, and she wished that she could return to being investigator/observer Hermione instead of this tongue-tied former student.

Her wish was granted almost immediately, for the teacup rose to his lips and tilted up, and when it descended again she could see the milky tea where his mouth must be. It began to fade straight away, and by the time he swallowed, it was nearly invisible. The cake disappeared more slowly; it was still visible...although translucent...as it passed down his throat and into the area covered by his shirt.

She described this phenomenon to him, and then went to the refrigerator and retrieved a dish of pitted olives. "Take one of these in your mouth, would you?" she said, holding out the dish.

The olive rose into the air and hung suspended.

"I can still see it," she said. "All right, chew." And after a moment, "It's fading now, but it's still visible. A bit revolting, actually; why don't you go ahead and swallow?"

She looked now at the paper in her hand. *Sth to do w/bodily fluids*, said his angular handwriting. *Saliva?*

He had obligingly snipped off a slender lock of hair, which she had been intrigued to see had remained invisible, blossoming into view several hours later along with the rest of Snape's corporeal being. She looked around for it now, but it was nowhere to be seen; with a wry smile of admiration she realized that he must have taken it with him. She had been ready to slip it into a vial and label it *S Snape 18.09.08*...because you never knew when something like that might come in useful...but of course he would have the long-standing habit of being very careful about that sort of thing.

It had certainly been one of her more interesting days. Quite odd, in retrospect, to think that Professor Snape had been walking about her lab as naked as Adam. The idea had made her slightly squeamish at first...a bit like imagining your parents that way...but she had stopped thinking about it once she began actively observing the effects of the potion.

For his part, it hadn't seemed to bother him at all. Once he was fully resubstantiated he seemed quite relaxed, and they compared notes as if they'd been working together for years. He even teased her lightly about having briefly lost track of him, about how comical she'd looked groping about in front of her like a child playing blind man's buff.

Now she drained the rest of the whisky from her glass and put the stack of papers aside. The liquor had taken the edge off the dream-driven anxiety, but she didn't feel the least bit sleepy. She brushed her teeth and crawled back into bed anyway, knowing that if she didn't at least try to get back to sleep she would feel ghastly the next day.

She reached into the drawer of her bedside table and withdrew the vibrator she kept there, rolling over onto her back and opening her legs. Just a quick buzz...that might relax her enough to let her sleep. She closed her eyes and leaned back into the pillow, her mind searching for the images that would focus her blood and let her find her release. She had long since ceased recalling past lovers for this purpose; that parade of faces and bodies had staled for her years ago, and now provoked only indifference or the occasional pang of guilt for her own remembered unkindnesses. Even prospective objects of fantasy...a lovely Muslim boy she'd spoken to briefly on the train, that gorgeous bloke from Nine Inch Nails...didn't do it for her anymore, and lately when she pursued this solitary escape she focused mostly on fleeting, almost abstract images: lips and teeth and fingers touching her in the right places, there, just there, yes, ah . . . and it was over in a matter of minutes, her mind loosed to find sleep again.

Snape sat in the armchair in his hotel room in the predawn, regarding the parchment in his hand with disgust.

"Fuck me up the arse with a pineapple," he said.

It was difficult to know how much of the disgust he was feeling was directed towards the note from Shacklebolt, and how much towards himself.

Really, he was losing his touch. For all the effort he had put into it, his letter to Shacklebolt had been sloppy work, and he held the proof in his hands.

18 September 2008

Snape,

Clearly you've found something. Please make a full report immediately and cease this ridiculous posturing. ('Ever yr humble servant?' Really, Severus?)

KS

He crumpled the parchment and dispatched it in an irritated flash of blue fire.

He began composing a list, sorting out what he was actually trying to accomplish. A mental list, because Rule Number One was *Never Write Things Down*.

1. Stay out of Azkaban. For as long as possible.

Meaning: feed Shacklebolt as little information as he could get by with. String him along, make it last as long as he could. Because it was a dead certainty that once the Ministry had what they were looking for, his usefulness to them would be ended and he would be back among the Dementors faster than you could say "Merlin's hairy balls."

What were they looking for? That was the crux of it. He had no illusions about Shacklebolt's forthrightness, and knew that the two of them were playing opposite sides of the same game: Kingsley would tell him as little as possible, and embed even that pittance in a cloud of obfuscatory disinformation. He would set his bloodhound on a confusing array of trails, and somewhere among them would be the one that he was really after.

And Snape, for his part, would do his best to sniff out just which one that was. Without letting Shacklebolt know that he knew. Which led to

2. Stay one step ahead of Kingsley Fucking Shacklebolt.

And then there was

3. Shag Hermione Granger.

Which needed no explanation whatsoever.

And as long as he was being disgusted with himself, he might as well spare a bit for yesterday's spectacular loss of self-control. Christ on a cracker, he wasn't some randy teenager following his cock around.

He crossed to the desk, took out a sheet of parchment, and began to write.

A/N: Thanks as always to my awesome BBP team, corianderpie and exartemarte. And a special one this chapter to Dr Charity Johansson, my sister and anatomy-picker.

Worse than Dragon Farts

Chapter 11 of 16

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Chapter 11. Worse than Dragon Farts

Vorapulpam: A feared instrument of mayhem until it was outlawed at the end of the eighteenth century, Vorapulpam possesses the quality of eating swiftly and exclusively through human flesh. It typically creates cavernous wounds which, if they are not immediately fatal, often result in a lingering and painful death from sepsis. Vorapulpam enjoyed a brief resurgence in popularity in the early twentieth century, after the 1917 discovery by Canadian wizard Philopator Lefèbvre that the addition of a small quantity of tardigrades after the finished potion had been allowed to rest for twenty-four hours altered it in such a way that it would attack and dissolve only dead human tissue. However, since it is impossible to brew this benign substance without first producing its caustic antecedent, the ban on possession of the potion was lifted, but not on its manufacture.

...Glaphyra Fink-Nottle. *Historia Potionum*. London: Paracelsus Press, 1998.

Three and a half weeks into their partnership, Hermione was beginning to regret having given Snape all of the dicey potions and kept the legal ones for herself. He had spent yesterday preparing a fragrant batch of Percipio Corium, and as he methodically cracked the cooled sheets now for packaging, the faint odor of burnt sugar rose again into the air.

She, on the other hand, was assembling the components for a large order of Floo Powder, and was not especially looking forward to the mess and the smell.

"I thought you were supposed to crack that with your wand," she said, allowing her disgruntlement about the Floo ingredients to put an acerbic edge on her voice. They were working at tables a few feet apart, facing in the same direction, so she was talking to his back.

"That is indeed what the books will tell you," he replied, continuing to rap the topaz-colored sheets with a silver fork. "But using the subject's own utensil yields a more uniform result." His voice had the same smug tone it always did when he was showing off his superior knowledge and experience, and hearing it sharpened her irritation.

She heaved a large cauldron on top of her table with unnecessary force, making a satisfying whump.

"Fucking Floo Powder. It doesn't make much of a profit; I don't know why I took this order."

Snape said nothing, tucking the fork into a tin atop the wrapped packets and replacing the lid. He slid the tin onto a shelf and took down a folded dragonhide apron and gloves, and a pair of goggles.

"What in Merlin's name are you making now? You look as though you're getting ready for a nuclear attack."

"Vorapulpan."

"Oh." She shuddered. On second thoughts, maybe the Floo Powder wouldn't be so bad after all. "Rather you than me."

"How magnanimous of you." He pulled on the gloves. "Who buys this? You must charge a pretty penny, to make the risk worthwhile."

"Muggles. They have no idea. I sell it as a cleaning solution, under the name 'FRS remover.'"

"FRS?"

"Fucked-up repugnant shit."

He gave her a curious look. "What kind of Muggles need a solution that dissolves dead human flesh?"

"A New York company called Bio-Recovery. They specialize in crime scene cleanup."

"Circe's tits, that's a profession?"

"It's New York."

"I see," he said, and began dripping fer-de-lance venom into a small graduated cylinder.

An hour and a half later a beaker filled with thin liquid was cooling on his table, while Hermione was adding the macerated *Phallus impudicus* to her cauldron. A cloud of thick yellow smoke swelled up out of it, and she stepped back, gagging.

"Fuck me," she choked. "That's worse than dragon farts."

"I hesitate to imagine the occasion on which you might have been exposed to dragon farts."

"Charlie Weasley made Christmas crackers from them one year and sent them to Fred and George. Molly was livid."

"And to think you missed an opportunity to marry into that family."

"Fuck off," she said, unable to think of anything cleverer.

"Bloody hell!" he cried, which seemed a bit disproportionate until she realized that the malodorous smoke must finally have reached his nose. He picked up his wand and jabbed it toward the casement window nearest his worktable. The window swung noiselessly outward, and a further flick of his wand set a gentle vortex of air sucking out through it.

He turned around to face her. "Don't tell me your budget wouldn't accommodate a decent exhaust fan, Granger. Are you trying to asphyxiate us both?"

"Only you, actually."

Crookshanks felt it to be enough of an affront that She had been allowing this interloper to monopolize so much of Her time and attention. But it was really too much, being banished from Her presence for lengthy periods every day, a state of affairs which had coincided with Big-Nose's arrival. It wasn't that Crookshanks particularly liked the Room of Smells, which lacked a good soft place for sleeping; it was just that he resented being excluded.

So when the opportunity presented itself, he wasted no time in launching himself at the open window.

A younger cat would have sailed easily through the opening and jumped gracefully from the table to the floor. But Crookshanks was old and arthritic, and had not fully made peace with his diminished faculties; he landed awkwardly on the table and slid, scrambling for purchase, knocking over the beaker of unfinished Vorapulpan.

Snape gave a hoarse shout and lurched forward.

For a moment Hermione stood motionless, paralyzed with horror. Then she snatched up her wand, sprang around the corner of the table, and slammed bodily into him, half pushing, half dragging him in with her amongst the nozzles of the HazPot station. He was heavier than he looked, and it took her perhaps thirty seconds to shove him into position, and another fifteen to help him off with all the protective gear.

The station hummed into life, and the air around them shimmered briefly. She saw the potion lift away from the back of his clothing and vanish into the nozzles, and then the machine fell silent, the only sound left in the room Snape's labored breathing.

He started to move away from her, but she said, "Wait," and cast a quick *Tergeo* at the spilled potion remaining on the floor.

She stepped out and he followed her, staggering and catching himself with both hands on the edge of the table. His face was grey and covered with a light sheen of sweat. She looked him quickly up and down and saw, with a sudden feeling of sick dread, that the back of his trousers...completely dry a moment ago...had begun to glisten with a dark moisture.

He groaned and leaned forward onto the table.

Hermione knelt and unfastened his trousers, pulling them out away from his body in an effort to keep them from touching the wound as she slid them down. The grey shorts he was wearing under them were soaked through with blood, and there was a terrifying concavity where the swell of his right buttock should have been.

"Oh, Jesus," she said.

She spelled the shorts off him, and felt her skin go clammy; dark spots danced on the edges of her vision.

There was a gaping cavity, deep and wide enough to admit a man's fist, extending from just below his waist to the middle of his thigh. Blood was pouring rapidly from it and running down his leg. She pointed her wand at it and said, "*Sanguinem ardeo*," but she knew that a simple cautery charm would not hold the larger vessels for more than a minute or two.

He had begun to tremble violently. *He's going into shock*, she thought. She knew she needed to elevate his legs, but could think of no way to do it without laying him down on top of that horrific wound. Levitation was out of the question; she would need all her concentration for the healing charm.

"I'm going to push you up onto the table," she said. When he did not answer, she squatted, wrapped her arms about his lower legs, and lifted him so that he slid forward onto the table, leaving his trousers puddled on the floor. When she released him, the right side of her t-shirt was blood-soaked from neck to hem.

He was frighteningly still and silent.

"Snape? Severus? Can you hear me?"

"Unnghh," he said.

Passing her wand slowly above the wound, she said, "*Gadhya Prafsarva*."

Nothing happened, except that the blood continued to well up out of it.

"Fuck." Her wand hand was shaking, and she took a deep breath to try and steady it. "*Gadhya Prathaluva*."

The bleeding stopped immediately. Then, beginning with the outer edges and progressing inward, the wound began to fill in. At first the tissue was an angry purplish color, but by the time the edges had met and fused in the center, it was fading to a dark pink.

She touched it gently, tentatively, with her fingers. It was smooth, and warm but not hot, the skin hairless and shiny like a normal scar. She opened her palm and slid it down the length of where the wound had been; there was no heat or swelling at all.

"That was unpleasant as fuck," said Snape, raising himself up on his elbows and craning his neck around to look.

There was a moment in which Hermione felt as if the Earth had shifted infinitesimally on its axis.

At Hogwarts, she had seen Snape as, first and foremost, a teacher. Since running into him in Salamanca and working side by side with him for nearly a month, she had begun to regard him more as a colleague, albeit an older and much more experienced one.

But she had never...not for one second...thought of him as a man.

As a child she had gone through a stage of being acutely aware that all male beings had penises. For a period of months, whenever she saw a man...on the street, in church, at the grocery...she would think, *he's got one*, and imagine it, dangling there behind the flies of his trousers.

Something of the sort occurred now. She realized suddenly that Snape was naked from the waist down, and that if he were to raise up from the table she would come face to face with the cock he must surely possess. And then she thought, *fuck me, I've got my hand on Snape's naked arse!* and snatched it away.

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked shakily.

His color...such as it was...was starting to return, and he was looking at her with what she could swear was amusement.

"Better than before, certainly," he said. "But I could really use a drink."

"Oh, gods, me, too. What a brilliant idea. No, wait, don't get up!" Now he clearly was amused. "I've got a travel rug in the study, I'll get it for you."

He had, as it turned out, been too weak to walk on his own; standing up had been enough to make his ears ring and his field of vision begin to narrow. Hermione had cast a *Mobilicorpus* and steered him gently down a half-flight of stairs into her study, the crocheted rug flapping about his legs. Once he was settled in an overstuffed chair, she said, "I'll be right back," and ran back up the stairs.

The study was small, and crowded but tidy. There were, unsurprisingly, a number of bookshelves and a desk with several books open on it, but his attention was drawn immediately to a large diagram pinned prominently to one wall. It was perhaps four feet wide and three feet high, and looked from where he was sitting to be some sort of genealogical chart. Nearly all of the spaces between the labels in the diagram had been filled in by scribbles in inks of various colors. He was too far away to read them, or the chart itself, without getting up and walking across the room, which for the moment was out of the question.

Hermione reappeared, wearing a clean t-shirt and carrying a tray which she set down on the desk. "Blood-replenishing potion first," she announced, handing him a vial. He drank the viscous liquid off in one pull, then held out his hand for the whisky glass. "It's brandy," she said. "That's what they always give the fainting heroine in novels, so it seemed the best choice."

He wasn't especially pleased at the comparison, but had to admit that the combined effect of the potion and brandy was just what the doctor ordered. Warmth flushed through his limbs, and he was suddenly aware that his right arse-cheek was itching intensely. He wished she'd turn her back for a bit so he could scratch, but instead she sat down opposite him and propped her feet on the shared ottoman.

"Feeling better?" she asked.

"Much." He took another sip of the brandy. "Was that spell one of your originals?"

"Yes." He saw that the hand holding her glass was trembling slightly. "Sorry it took me a couple of tries to get it right. I've never actually used it before...in a practical situation, I mean."

"Remarkably effective, though. And obviously not Latin-derived. How did you work it out, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Of course I don't, and you're right, it isn't. I developed it from three Proto-Indo-European roots *ghedh*, *solwo*, and *kwreph*."

"Ah, yes, I remember your mentioning something about early language research. Why Proto-Indo-European?"

"Because it's the earliest form available. I got to wondering why so many spells have bits of Latin in them, or Greek. Why ancient languages should work but modern ones not. And I thought, maybe it's because those words are historically closer to the true names of things."

"So," he said, "if two-thousand-year-old words work well, why shouldn't older words work even better?"

"Exactly." She had taken her feet off the ottoman and folded them underneath her, and was leaning forward slightly. "What I think is, the original language spoken by humans consisted almost exclusively of the true names for objects and actions...the sounds that have real power over things. As languages evolved, words must have grown further and further distant from those original forms, and so lost most of their power. And since that earliest language predates writing by thousands of years, there's no record of those first words."

"And yet you seem to have figured them out."

"Oh, most of that work was already done." She gestured to the chart on the wall behind her. "There are armies of comparative linguists who've spent their lives puzzling out PIE roots. The difficult part is reconstructing the exact pronunciations and word order and inflected endings. All I did was to develop Arithmantic formulas that could do that with a decent level of accuracy."

She was trying to sound offhand, he could tell, but he could hear the pride and triumph she felt. Justifiably so, he thought: if she had indeed developed such formulae, it was a remarkable achievement. And explosive in its potential.

"Very impressive," he said.

"It's tedious, is what it is. That Healing Charm took me nearly six months to develop. Hundreds and hundreds of calculations based on thousands of language samples, all to distill out a list of a dozen possible wordings for a potentially workable spell."

"I can see how potion-making might provide a steadier source of income." He helped himself to another generous splash of brandy.

"It's difficult to get people to pay in advance for months of work that may not yield anything useful. I've had a handful of very lucrative commissions, but for the most part I have to invest the time up front and hope to come up with a marketable result. And you can only sell a new spell once, of course: after that the genie's pretty much out of the bottle."

"How many have you created?" He kept his tone light. *Just making conversation here.*

"Altogether, thirty-one, and sold half a dozen. I work on them in the evenings, mostly, when I've put the lab to rights and don't feel like cleaning up any more mess."

"The rest you just file away?" *Softly now.*

She gestured towards one of the shelves, on which sat a row of notebooks. "For the most part. I published a set of three reducing spells in an article for *Modern Grimoire* a year or so ago, but it's really more of a hobby than anything."

He knew the article. It had appeared under the name H. E. Sarah and was one of the first bits he had found that led him eventually to Salamanca. "I'd like to read it sometime."

"I'm sure I've got a copy around here somewhere. I'll try and unearth it tomorrow."

"I could look for it, save you the trouble."

Her head went back just slightly. "Much quicker if I do it. And speaking of tomorrow, do you think you'd be able to have a look at the tent?"

"Certainly. I'll have another go at the Vorapulpan first thing, and work on the tent while it's resting."

"You'll do no such thing."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I have to make deliveries tomorrow, and you're absolutely not going to work on a such a hazardous potion while I'm out."

"Miss Granger. Hermione." He allowed just enough of a sneer to make the use of her first name more condescending than intimate. "I have been handling dangerous substances on my own for a number of decades now. I can assure you, I don't need a minder."

"Suppose I hadn't been here today? Suppose you'd been working alone when that happened?"

"It would not have happened if I'd been working alone."

She opened her mouth to say something, then shut it again.

"Besides," he said, "You've been brewing up god knows what all by yourself here for years, haven't you? No mishaps in all that time?" *That HazPot station, did you acquire that before or after something blew up in your face and left that nasty mark?*

"Please. I'd just feel better if you waited. And the tent really does need doing."

"All right, then. How long will you be gone?"

"Till midday at least. But I reset the wards to admit you weeks ago, so just, you know, come and go however you like. Do you think the tent business will take long?"

"Mmm. Six or eight hours at least," he lied.

From somewhere in the house there was the sound of a bell, and she jumped to her feet. "That'll be your clothes."

He looked at her in disbelief. "You have a house-elf hidden away here? You?"

She shook her head and grinned. "All modern conveniences. Muggle machines, only slightly magically enhanced. I'll be right back." And she was up the stairs and gone.

He took the opportunity to make a quick reconnaissance of the bookshelves...and to have a blissfully satisfying scratch...and was back under the rug by the time she returned. She handed him his folded shorts and trousers, which were oddly warm.

"I'll leave you to it, then," she said.

"You know, Granger," he said, "if we're taking it in turns, you are overdue to get your kit off."

A/N

Spells and potions: Percipio Corium is an invention of corianderpie from her fic *Caramel*. Which, if you haven't read it, why are you wasting time on my author's notes? Go. Read. I command you. It's the single best chaptered SSHG fic I've ever read.

Vorapulpam and *Sanguinem Ardeo* are my inventions, as is of course the Healing Charm that Hermione uses on Snape's bum.

Bio-Recovery is a real New York company (<http://www.biorecovery.com/>).

The three PIE roots cited by Hermione are as accurately reproduced as I can make them without access to phonetic symbols.

Yes, the discrepancy in the way Snape and Hermione form the plural *offormula* was intentional. It's a generational thang.

Special thanks are due this chapter to sc010f for double-checking my Latin.

And as always, loads of thanks to my wonderful beta/Britpick team, corianderpie and exartemarte. They are patient, perspicacious, and alliterative.

Something of a Personal Nature

Chapter 12 of 16

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Chapter 12 Something of a Personal Nature

The notebooks were the obvious place to begin. He had been to a local *papelería* and bought a set of similar ones, with pasteboard bindings and quadrille pages; these he put in a stack on her desk. The routine of espionage was returning easily to him...he had, almost without conscious thought, planned his course of action along with a backup plan and explanation should she return early and surprise him *in flagrante*. The tent was pitched farther up the hill behind Wilbur's pen, the area directly around the house being too steeply sloped to accommodate it. There were half a dozen plausible explanations why he might have come down to the house; his presence in the study would be a bit trickier to explain.

He took the leftmost notebook from the shelf and opened it. The first page was dated June 2001, and was covered with notes for the creation of a spell for finding hidden objects: lists of words in various languages, some circled and some crossed out; arithmantic formulae and linguistic charts. This went on for some fifty pages, and culminated in two lists:

sithka

sithkae

sitkala

seku

setku

orlop

orloep

horloip

ubilaz

eubilaz

ybilax

lawwo

lawvo

lavvok

kudzhdam

kudizh-dam

kudham-izh

hudjanek

hudianik

khudjank

skurijan

eskurian

He reasoned that these must be the actual spell-words, and resisted the temptation to test them on the spot; best to get on with the task at hand and try out her various spells at his leisure when he was assured of some privacy.

He closed the notebook, and slid it beneath one of the blank ones. Drawing his wand, he passed it diagonally across the cover of the empty notebook and said, "*Reproductor Libri.*" The resultant copy he reduced and slipped into his pocket, then replaced the original on the shelf and took down the next notebook in the series.

When he opened the sixth notebook, an envelope fluttered to the floor. He recognized the Ministry letterhead even before he opened it and saw the familiar handwriting.

Dear Hermione,

Well, that was just...harsh.

In case you need reminding, I died for this.

You? You weren't even there for the worst of it. You were in St Mungo's, after doing something monumentally stupid.

So forgive me if I'm a bit resentful at the tone you've taken regarding my work at the Ministry. Here's some news: real life is all about compromise. We're not living in a fairy tale. The choices I've made haven't been easy ones, but I've made them so that the greatest number of people can live safe, happy lives.

I'm sorry if that doesn't meet with your approval.

Harry

Which of the Ministry's postwar policy decisions had provoked the rift between them? he wondered. Confined in Azkaban, he had hardly been in the thick of things politically, but it was no secret that the Ministry, in the aftermath of Voldemort's demise, had tended to err on the side of safety rather than liberty. There was a deal more surveillance and intrusiveness than there had been in past years...interceptions of Owl posts, monitoring of the Floo network, that sort of thing...all in the name of keeping the public safe.

He waited until after he had copied the notebook before replacing the letter between its pages; Ministry correspondence was often protected by spells that alerted the sender in the event of unauthorized copying.

The remaining three dozen notebooks took over an hour to copy, and once he had the miniatures safely stowed, and the bookshelf returned to its former order, he Apparated back up the hill and into the tent.

She was right, he thought...the praetorist she used was indeed excellent. The tent was a marvel of compact utility, a bit like a Romany caravan that was somehow larger inside than out and with lights and gas and hot and cold running water. There was a small living area, with a kitchen off to the left and a bedroom to the right. On the far wall of the bedroom, two doors led to a small closet and a bathroom almost as large as the bedroom itself.

Adding a second bedroom and closet would be the work of a few minutes, but the bathroom, he realized suddenly, was another matter entirely. He hadn't shared toilet facilities with anyone else since his years as a student at Hogwarts...certainly not in Azkaban...and the thought of sitting on the lav with the latest issue of *Modern Grimoire* while Granger tapped impatiently at the door was off-putting to say the least. Still, magical plumbing added significantly to the weight of the finished tent, so any additions had to be worth the extra effort involved in lugging them about. The thought of explaining his choices to her ("I like to take my time. And have a read. And a fag.") made him wince.

He pulled from his coat pocket a folded parchment on which he had made a number of preliminary sketches, and set about methodically making modifications to the tent, beginning in the little entryway-cum-living room and proceeding clockwise, so that the bedrooms and bathroom were left for last. Perhaps by the time he got round to them, inspiration would have struck.

Hermione made her way up the hill, carrying the tea-tray and fretting over the issue of the loo.

She hadn't said anything to Severus about adding bathroom fixtures. It was only while waiting for the tea to steep and anticipating what she might see when she entered the tent that it occurred to her suddenly that a man might not understand the necessity for separate facilities. It wasn't that she was prudish...in fact the thought of his catching a glimpse of her, wet and naked from the bath, was disconcertingly interesting. But six years at Hogwarts had done nothing to make her less uncomfortable with smelling other people's poo...or worse, knowing that they could smell hers; during her fifth year, she had spent months trying to fashion a variant of *Evanescio* that would remove all traces from the air. Men seemed strangely immune to this concern, or even to find it a subject for hilarity, and the thought of Snape making a sarky remark about her womanly perfumes made her cringe.

The tent looked exactly the same on the outside, but when she ducked through the opening, she was immediately aware that it seemed bigger. And lighter: the entryway now had a large window through which she could clearly see Wilbur, rooting in the mud beneath the late afternoon sunlight.

"Anyone home?" she called, setting the tray down on a low table that hadn't been there before. "I've brought tea."

Snape came in, wand in hand, from one of the side rooms. His eyes widened when he saw the quantity of food on the tray.

"You didn't come down for lunch," she said, feeling oddly apologetic, "and I thought you might be hungry."

"Famished," he agreed, "but would you like to have a look round before we eat?"

"Ooh, yes, if you don't mind." She cast a quick Stasis charm on the teapot and followed him.

To the left of the kitchen, he had added a modest workroom, with shelves, a bench, and a small collection of instruments for processing specimens. It, too, had a window: a small round porthole set high in the wall.

She picked up an antique-looking knife with an elegant carved black handle. "This is beautiful," she said. "It's dragon fang, isn't it? Where did you get it?"

"It was my mother's," he replied...and then, in answer to the question she had not asked, "I had Narcissa pop over to my house and pick up some of my things."

She felt the blood drain from her face. "To send or to bring?" she asked quietly.

"To bring, naturally," he said, as if he were talking about nothing of more consequence than the morning's milk delivery. "Much quicker than shipping them."

"You brought Narcissa Malfoy to my house?"

Her voice, still pitched low, was shaking with anger, and he turned in surprise to look at her.

"Of course not. I met her at my hotel room in Salamanca. She has no idea you're here."

The pounding in her ears began to recede.

"Was that wise? Letting her know where you were, I mean. I thought you were trying to stay under the Ministry's radar."

"Under their what?"

"Where they couldn't find you. How do you know she won't report back to them?"

"Oh, Narcissa's nothing if not discreet. Besides, she owes me."

For what?

She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

The kitchen was much the same, with the addition of a window over the sink. He seemed to like windows, she thought, and wondered if the years in Azkaban had left him a bit claustrophobic. "The extra daylight is quite nice," she said, by way of sidling up to the topic.

"Yes," he said. "I was wondering why you didn't have any windows. Thought maybe you had a pathological aversion to them."

"No," she said, "it was just the money. Yossarian's charges an outrageous premium for those one-way windows, and I decided it wasn't worth it. I don't spend that much time indoors when I'm in the field anyway." *Got enough of that in the Forest of Dean, thank you very much.*

"They take advantage of you, then. It's really not that difficult or complicated."

"Not for you, maybe."

"Hmph," he said, but she could tell he was pleased.

Her apprehensions regarding the bathroom arrangements proved groundless. One small, central room now contained only the bathtub, to which he had added a shower surrounded by a water-repelling charm. There was a bedroom on either side of this room, and on the far side of each, a tiny room with a toilet and washbasin.

She was flooded with a ridiculous sense of relief. "Oh, well done," she said.

"You don't mind the extra weight?" he asked diffidently. "I thought, er, under the circumstances..."

"No," she said. "It's perfect."

Back in the living room, he picked up a sandwich and sat down in a brown leather armchair she'd never seen before.

"Lovely view," she said, gesturing toward the window with a sliver of ham before popping it into her mouth. "Just as well he can't see me in here making a meal of one of his relatives."

"Who's going to take care of him while we're away?"

"The neighbor's boy, Raul. He feeds Crookshanks, too, although I do worry that he'll come by one day and find Crookshanks has kicked it. Could be traumatic for a twelve-year-old."

"Arriving to find an ex-cat, you mean." And then, at her astonished look, "What? I'm not completely ignorant of the popular Muggle culture, you know."

"Yes, you can just manage the odd obscure forty-years-out-of-date reference."

He smirked, and for several minutes they drank their tea in silence. After a while he said, "There's something I've been wanting to ask you, if you don't mind. Something of a personal nature."

Her pulse quickened, and she made herself focus on his hands as they set his teacup back onto the table. "Go on."

"That healing charm you used on me," he began.

Oh. She felt curiously let down. "What about it?"

"You said you had never tried it out before."

"No. No opportunity, really." He didn't expect her to inflict wounds on Wilbur just so that she could heal them, did he?

"I would have thought it might effect some improvement..." he was reaching out a hand toward her face "...to this."

He had laid his fingers along her jaw, and now brushed his thumb gently along the scar that extended from the corner of her mouth out across her cheek.

She blinked. "...no, I never thought of trying it."

"Really? I would have thought..." he stopped, clearly thinking better of what he had been about to say, and took his hand away from her face.

"After all this time, I forget it's there," she said, knowing how feeble that sounded.

He regarded her levelly. "I find that difficult to believe."

There was a long silence.

"Not that you're not a beautiful woman nonetheless."

The air inside the tent seemed suddenly very still and hot.

She lifted her chin and looked defiantly at him. "No, then," she admitted, "I don't really forget it. I've just never...I've never wanted to change it."

He raised an eyebrow.

"I want it there," she said. "It's a reminder...for me, and for the people who know me. I want them to be reminded, every time they see me. Not to be able to forget." Her lips were trembling, and she pressed them together.

"Reminded of what? Not to forget what?"

She stared at him.

"If you don't mind my asking."

She could feel herself starting to cry. She always cried when she was angry, and it always mortified her.

"Reminded of who I got it from."

"And who was that?"

His gaze was holding her now, the black eyes looking steadily into hers.

She looked back.

"You, of course," she said.

A/N

I have a wonderful beta/Britpick team: corianderpie and exartemarte. They regularly rock my world!

Spells in this chapter: *Reproductor Libri* is mine. *Evanesco* is canon, and I thought the Stasis charm was, too, but I can't find any reference to it. So the evidence would suggest that I stole it from the aforementioned corianderpie.

For All Practical Purposes, the Truth

Chapter 13 of 16

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Disclaimer: All the good stuff belongs to JKR. The rest is mine.

13 For All Practical Purposes, the Truth

He summoned up his driest, most skeptical tone.

"Miss Granger, I am aware that I was not the most... nurturing of teachers. And you were certainly an exceptionally annoying pupil. But I think I would remember casting a hex which blasted part of your face off."

That had sounded less unkind in his head, but she seemed more puzzled than offended.

"You don't remember how you got to St Mungo's?"

He shook his head. "I woke up shackled to the bed, with an Auror on either side of me and a Mediwitch digging round enthusiastically in my neck. They didn't bother with explanations." *Too busy trying to keep me from hexing them to shards and escaping through the window, bed and all.*

"And the Shrieking Shack? You remember that?"

"I remember the Dark Lord setting that accursed snake on me. Do you ever see Longbottom? You must thank him for me...I understand he was the one who finally lopped its bloody head off. Wish I could have been there to see that."

"Do you remember Harry being there? In the shack, I mean, not at St Mungo's."

"Yes." He stifled a twitch of discomfort at the embarrassing memory of that desperate and maudlin exchange. "But that's the last thing I remember. And I don't recollect your being there at all."

"Well, I was. And after Harry and Ron left, it was just you and me."

"You stayed behind?"

She colored slightly. "Not right away. There was this...message from Voldemort, sort of broadcast, and we all three started back to the castle. But just as we were leaving, I saw...or thought I saw...a movement, just the tiniest bit, so I turned back."

"Why?" His voice was harsher than he had intended, but his throat felt clamped shut, and it was all he could do to force the word out.

"I thought there was a chance you might still be alive."

"And preparing to use my last iota of strength to throw a Killing Curse after you and your little friends?"

She looked surprised. "No. I wanted to see if there was anything I could do to save you."

He snorted in disbelief. "Why in the world would you do that?"

She grimaced. "That's exactly what Ron said. Well, not exactly...he was a bit more colorful about it, as I recall."

He imagined her hanging back, and Weasley shouting imprecations at her. What a thick-headed lump that boy was...he'd had a treasure like Granger close at hand for years, and all he could think to do was wheedle her into doing his homework for him.

"Why, then?" he asked. "There was a war on. I was the enemy, and I'd been conveniently dispatched by what I believe is known as 'friendly fire.' Why not just leave, and let nature take its course?"

"You weren't the enemy. Not really."

"No. But you could hardly have known that at the time."

She looked away for a few seconds, then back at him. "It just seemed like such a... such a waste, and I couldn't bear it. To have the chance to help you, and not do it...to just let you die, when you might live... how could I do that?"

"Quite easily, I should have thought."

"Perhaps you don't know me very well, then."

"Perhaps not. Perhaps I've greatly overestimated your intelligence."

She looked stung, and he cursed himself. Why the fuck was he sniping at her? The girl was telling him how she had saved his life...saved his ~~life~~...and he was snapping at her like a cornered dog.

It was just that it made him so bloody *uncomfortable*. He hated gifts, because there was invariably some self-serving motive at the back of them. Some craven sycophancy, sucking up to the Dark Lord's right-hand man. Or the engendering of a debt against some future day of reckoning. Or a trap set to make him look a fool in front of his classmates.

Nothing was ever, ever free. There was always a price, and the longer the payment was deferred, the higher the eventual cost.

To hear her say so artlessly that it would have been a waste to let him die filled him with shame and a weary sense of dread. He had wanted to be done, had thought that serving out his time in Azkaban would make him, at last, quits with the world and beholden to no one. And now she was telling him he had incurred...while unconscious!...a debt so appallingly vast he could not hope to repay it.

First Shackbolt's extortion, and now this. He felt as though a giant were sitting on his chest.

"Go on," he said.

"There was so much blood, I thought you must have a huge wound somewhere. But when I got your shirt off, I couldn't find anything else...just the two punctures in your neck."

She paused and drew a deep breath.

"I almost healed them shut. I thought the bleeding was the problem, you see. I hadn't got any Dittany, but I had my wand out, ready to try *Episkey*, and I suddenly realized that no simple bite would bleed like that, and it must be the venom causing it."

"And closing them would have made it worse."

"Yes, exactly. It would have sealed the venom inside, and you would have died for certain."

"Indeed." He suppressed a shudder. Nagini's venom would have digested him, a meal saved for later, until he was nothing but a liquid-filled sack made of skin.

"I didn't know any spells for drawing out venom. We learned antidotes to ingested poisons in your class, but nothing about bites or any sort of injected toxins. I didn't know what to do."

"Yet, clearly, you did something."

"Yes." She looked somewhat abashed. "I sucked on the wound."

"You *what*?"

"Sucked on it. To try to get as much of the venom out as I could." The shock must have shown on his face, because she laughed shakily. "What can I say, it seemed a good idea at the time. I had to lie down next to you and put my mouth to your neck like a vampire, and it was a good thing Ron had already left with Harry, or I'd never have heard the end of it."

"What on Earth were you thinking?"

She gave another little semi-hysterical laugh. "That I was so glad my parents were dentists."

He stared at her, beginning to wonder if she'd come a bit unhinged.

"My Aunt Jean? The one in America that used to sing to me all the time? She meant well, but some of the songs were really frightful, the kind of thing that gives kids nightmares. I mean, I love her, but she had no children of her own, and, well... there was one she used to sing me about a child that was so skinny that it went down the plug-hole while its mother was giving it a bath. I was terrified of the bath for months."

More than a bit, perhaps. She seemed to have wandered completely off the track, and he looked questioningly at her.

"Oh, right, dentists. Well, there was another song, an American folk song about a young couple. The husband is mowing a field and gets bitten in the heel by a snake, and his wife sucks out the venom. And then the last line goes, 'But Molly had a rotten tooth, and so the pizen killed them both.' I used to think about that when I brushed my teeth, that I had to take care of them because when I grew up I might have to save my husband from a snakebite."

He dropped his face into his hands. It had undoubtedly been the saving of him, that impulse to draw the venom from his neck into her own mouth. But Nagini was no ordinary viper, and her venom needed no breach in the body's natural boundaries to wreak its destruction.

"Oh, god," he said, into his hands.

"It didn't hurt, you know," she said. "For a long time, I didn't know it was affecting me at all. It didn't even taste especially bad...just a sort of sickly-sweet taste. And not only was I taking in and spitting out great mouthfuls of it, I'd been lying with the right side of my face in the puddle where you'd started to bleed out before we'd got there."

Oh, Merlin's hoary beard, why hadn't she just left him to die?

"But it didn't hurt at all," she repeated, as if that somehow made it all right. "There was just a tingling feeling, and then that part of my face went numb. I didn't pay any attention to it, because I knew I had to get you to hospital, and you were way too heavy for me to lift, and I'd only ever side-alonged anyone twice, and the first time I did it Ron got Splinched, plus I'd no idea how to manage it at the same time as a Mobilicorpus, and..."

She paused in this headlong narrative and took a deep breath.

"I just put my arms round you and rolled over."

He gave a little nod of satisfaction. A very resourceful girl, our Miss Granger.

"And took me to St Mungo's."

"Right. Which was chaos, absolute chaos. We landed in the reception area of A&E, and there were injured people everywhere, bleeding and screaming and groaning. Not a Healer in sight. I left you on the floor, and started off to find someone who could help you, and then... the room went very dark and I just sort of fell over, and the next thing I knew it was three weeks later."

"And did they ask you about what had happened to me?"

"No one made the connection between us. They assumed I'd been damaged in the battle by some sort of hex, and kept me asleep for most of the reconstructive work. When Harry and Ron came to see me, I asked about you, and Harry said you'd been taken off to the hospital wing at Azkaban as soon as you were fit to travel."

"And that's all he said?"

Her mouth was a tight line. "That's all he said *then*. A few weeks later he told me that there had been a trial...a very short one, since you pleaded guilty. Which I still don't understand. At all."

"I *was* guilty."

"Like fuck you were. There's guilty, and there's guilty. You could have fought it."

"To what end?"

"Freedom. Justice."

He shook his head. "Don't you remember what it was like, those first few months? All those fools who had buried their heads in the sand while the Dark Lord rose to power...they were out for blood, now that he was safely dead. They would never have let me go free. And if they had, where would I have gone that some mob of righteous citizens wouldn't have seized upon the first opportunity to tear me to pieces? Look what happened to Thorfinn Rowle. I was probably safer in Azkaban."

"Truth, then."

"Hermione." He leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes briefly. Had he ever been this idealistic and naïve? Even as a boy?

He felt profoundly tired, and old.

"When people are determined to believe something...when they want with all their hearts for it to be true...then it might as well be true. It becomes, for all practical purposes, the truth. And the truth is that I murdered Albus Dumbledore. That is the one salient fact that will always be associated with my name; in fact, it will probably be written on my tombstone."

"Not all killing is murder," she said stubbornly. "You could have proved it. There was evidence."

"Was there?" He raised an eyebrow.

"You gave those memories to Harry," she said.

"And he showed them to you, did he?"

"Well... no. He said they were in a safe place. But he told me what was in them."

"When? Before the trial?"

"No," she admitted. "Afterwards. We had a bloody great row about it."

"Did you now? Do tell."

She had begun, strangely enough, to cry. "I couldn't believe he hadn't spoken in your defense. I called him an ass, and a coward, and a hypocrite, and said if he was willing to sell you out after what you had done for him he was no better than...than Voldemort."

"That was a bit hyperbolic, don't you think? And let's be clear...I *did nothing* for him."

"You protected him! You helped him!"

"What I did, I did for his mother. Never for him."

"As if that makes a scrap of difference!"

"It does to me." He looked hard at her. "Understand this: I went willingly to Azkaban. I had done terrible things, Hermione, and allowed even more terrible things to happen by my own inaction. And if, as you seem to think, I didn't deserve to be punished for killing Albus, there was certainly enough guilt on my conscience to warrant the sentence I was given."

A dull pounding had begun behind his eyes. He stood, and was suddenly aware of the weight of the tiny notebooks in his trouser pockets.

"I should be getting back," he said stiffly. "...thank you. I am in your debt, it would seem; I apologize for having caused you injury."

"Don't be an idiot," she said fiercely, stepping towards him and holding out her hand.

But he had already begun to turn, and before she could reach him, he was gone.

A/N

My betas, corianderpie and exartemarte, are made of win.

Songs referenced in this chapter: *Mother's Lament*, an old music hall song you can hear performed by Cream here: <http://youtu.be/zwEPCd0wtEI>

Springfield Mountain, an American folksong supposed to have originated in Connecticut. You can read about it here <http://www.lizlyle.lofgrens.org/RmOISngs/RTOS-SpringfieldMountain.html> and hear it sung (by a woman who sounds British) here: <http://youtu.be/4abM0CNcGrg> .

The Same Dismal Destination

Chapter 14 of 16

Ten years after the war ends, Snape is given a task that may well prove his undoing.

Disclaimer: Everything you recognize belongs to JKR. I do this for fun, and make no money from it.

14 The Same Dismal Destination

He stayed away for a full week, then turned up again just as Hermione was considering setting off in search of him. He walked in through the side door of the lab...after a perfunctory knock that he didn't await an answer to...just as if that unsettling conversation, and the ensuing week of silence, had never happened.

She was sitting on a stool at one of the lab tables, casting Cushioning Charms around a vial of the Invisibility Potion before packing it for shipment. He came round the corner of the table and picked up the discarded "Love Potion No 9" label, which she had replaced with one that read "Poção de Invisibilidade."

"Where were you keeping those?" he asked, without preamble. She opened her mouth, then shut it again, momentarily dumfounded by this abrupt plunge back into the conversational waters.

"Unless you'd rather not say," he added.

"Oh! No, that's not it. Hidden compartment behind the wine rack," she said. "Anything iffy or secret goes in there until I send it out." Then, after a pause, "Severus..."

He held up a hand. "Don't."

"But I just..."

"Hermione. I've made my peace with it. Best to just get on with things." He unbuttoned his cuffs and rolled up his sleeves. She noticed that he rolled the left one just a bit longer than the right, little enough difference that it could have been accidental.

"Okay, then. I was just packing these to send ahead of us to Brazil." She gestured toward a pile of bundles in one corner of the room. "If you'll reduce those and put them in a single box, I'll label it. I've got a freight owl ordered for tonight, so it can all be waiting for us when we get there."

"Why not just take them with us when we go? It won't hurt them to travel through a Portkey."

"We're not Portkeying."

He looked at her, disbelief on his face. "You can't mean to Apparate over a distance that great? It's far too dangerous. Surely the international Portkeys aren't that expensive."

"They're not. But I don't use them anymore, because I've heard that the Ministry secretly monitors them. And I don't want those bastards knowing about my comings and goings."

"Understood," he said, "and you'll get no argument from me. But that doesn't make Apparition a safe alternative."

"We're not Apparating," she said. "We're flying."

"You're not serious."

"Completely."

"You'll have to lend me a broom, then, unless you're proposing that we go in tandem. Which we might have to do, now I think of it, so we can take turns sleeping. Not to mention that it's nearly November and we'll freeze our collective bollocks off. It must take, what, three or four days?"

"On brooms it might, but we're going in an aeroplane. Which takes about a day."

He was silent for a moment. "That still doesn't explain why we can't take all our things with us. You're allowed baggage on aeroplanes, surely?"

"Of course you are, and we'll be taking suitcases for our clothes. But nothing that has to be Reduced. Or Disillusioned in order to get it through customs," she said, indicating the potion vials.

"Because?"

"Because magic and electronics are a dangerous mix. Simple electrical devices seem to work all right in the presence of a small amount of magic, but aeroplanes are controlled by very sensitive navigational equipment, and any spells or magical emanations could interfere with them."

"You know this for a fact?"

"As it happens, no. It's only a working hypothesis; would you like to be the first to test it? Be my guest. I can keep a broom in the air...just barely...but a hundred tons of aluminium and perspex and hysterical Muggles? No, thank you."

He exhaled forcefully. "When are we leaving, then?"

"Day after tomorrow. Have you got your passport with you?"

"It's at the hotel; I'll bring it."

"Do the Ministry know you're in Spain?"

"I think not. They certainly know I'm out of the country, but I Apparated to France before Portkeying here, so they haven't got any way of knowing where I am. Unless, as you suspect, they're monitoring the foreign Portkeys. But you know there's no love lost between the French and British Ministries, so I rather doubt that you're correct in that particular case."

"Well, then. We'll need the use of some owls so you can keep in touch and not arouse their suspicions." She thought for a minute. "Our flight has a stopover in São Paulo, and I know a witch there. Maybe she can meet us at the airport and lend us a few. How often are you supposed to check in?"

"Once a week should do it."

"Really? I would have thought they'd have you on a shorter leash." That had sounded rather ruder than she had intended, and she immediately amended it. "I mean, aren't they afraid you'll just do a runner?"

"They've taken precautions," he said, and something in his tone forbade further enquiry.

"Well, then," she said brightly, "All that's left is for you to pack your bags. You get one big one to check in, and one small one to take with you onto the plane. No liquids or sharp objects in that one...just a change of clothes, your toothbrush, and something to read. You can use my toothpaste."

"Any other instructions, Matron?"

She stuck out her tongue. "Don't be difficult. I've done this before, and you haven't, so it makes sense for me to take charge. And for God's sake pack some lightweight clothes, or you'll be sorrier than you know once we get there."

In the event, he was glad enough of her officiousness; it was oddly comforting in such unfamiliar surroundings. The airport was insanely crowded, with people either scurrying about like voles or standing in endless queues. A bit like the Ministry in the final days of Voldemort's ascendancy, now he thought of it. Except that at the Ministry, there were actual sentient beings who transacted business with you, instead of a rank of featureless computer monitors. He saw an elderly couple in some sort of tribal dress, peering apprehensively at one of the screens and chattering back and forth in an unfamiliar tongue, and he felt a pang of empathy. *There but for the grace of Miss Granger go I*, he thought.

So he followed behind her like a dim-witted uncle, hauling their two large suitcases while she managed the smaller bags. They stood in one queue until she coaxed a computer into spitting forth their tickets, then in another where he hefted the suitcases onto a scale and relinquished them to a functionary, and finally in a third to undergo a thoroughly undignified security inspection.

"You have to ask yourself," he said, shoving his feet back into his boots, "how bad getting Splinched could possibly have been."

She laughed. "Oh, trust me, the fun is just beginning."

He liked it when she laughed, he realized. She had a snorty kind of laugh, the kind that came from deep in the throat...worlds away from Narcissa's affected tinkle or Bellatrix's demented cackling. There was something so genuine and, well, *wholesome* about it that it made him remember...almost...being young himself, and laughing at things that were comical rather than cruel.

Thinking about her in this light always brought him round to an uncomfortable consideration of the trajectory of his investigation, and its inevitable intersection with their nascent friendship. The fatal geometry of it intruded into his consciousness for the briefest of moments, until he was able...from long practice...to consign it to that compartment in his brain reserved for things best left unexamined. *I'll think about that later*, he told himself. *Stick it in the vault and just get through today.*

"Today," however, turned out to be unpleasantly long, and made up primarily of waiting, in various attitudes of discomfort. Once they had boarded the plane, Hermione firmly refused to permit him even the most benign spells like *Muffliato* or *Amplifico*, so he passed a sleepless night with his knees jammed against the seat in front of him and a foam plug crammed into each ear canal.

Hermione, meanwhile, rested her head on his shoulder and slept with the pragmatic opportunism of the veteran campaigner, snoring softly and occasionally drooling onto the thin red blanket that was apparently what passed for bedclothes among Muggle travelers. He wished he had thought to take a dose of Dreamless Sleep before boarding; surely a digested potion couldn't possibly interfere with the workings of the fucking aeroplane.

He was exhausted but unable to rest, his nerves scraped raw from the crowds and noise and strangeness. Try as he might to keep his mental vault sealed, his awareness of her sleeping form, snuggled unselfconsciously into him, contrived relentlessly to prise open the door.

He brushed a curl back from her forehead with a tentative hand. There was a vulnerability to her face that called forth an uncomfortable surge of tenderness in his chest, and with it an answering stab of guilt. And close on its heels came that terrible trapped feeling that had once been his constant companion: the knowledge that what was done was done, what was bound could not be loosed, and whichever way he turned, all doors were closed to him save the one that led back into the darkness.

Through the porthole he could see the inky sea miles below them glittering in the moonlight, stretching out endlessly in all directions. As the hours passed, he examined one possibility after another, searching savagely for the loophole that would let him keep something of his life for himself.

Every path his mind ventured down led to the same dismal destination.

By now he knew from experience exactly how delicately he could dance along the edge of Shackbolt's orders before his gut would begin to cramp with the initial stirrings of Azkaban's implacable summons. He always kept some titbit in reserve to dispatch the instant he felt the sickness blossom inside him, living constantly barely within the letter of his instructions and just shy of the overwhelming impulse to Apparate back to the gates of Azkaban.

And this, he knew with sudden certainty, he would never do. Could never do.

At first, when it had been simple incarceration, it had been endurable, even cleansing. Life in his cell had had a certain monastic sparseness that had even seemed to him to be an opportunity for atonement, a way to finish paying off, once and for all, the debt he had incurred in his youth. And except for the boredom...which he alleviated by setting himself increasingly difficult intellectual exercises...being deprived of liberty, of comfort, of human companionship...how was that different, really, from his entire life since taking the Mark at seventeen?

But then the Dementors had been returned to Azkaban as its guardians, and his existence there had abruptly changed from simple penance to desperate fear, and the certain knowledge that his sanity was slipping away. His mental barriers were practiced and strong, so he had been able to hold out longer than most, but the erosion was inexorable, and made the more dreadful by his awareness of it.

He would do whatever he had to do to avoid going back. And there lay the bleak reality of it: any strategy he could devise was, at best, temporary. He had ten years left on his sentence, and there was no possible way to spin his current assignment out for more than five or six months at most. Shackbolt would get what he wanted, Snape's usefulness to him would end, and back he would go.

Except that I will not. I will die first.

This knowledge, he reflected wryly, had a wonderfully focusing effect on the mind: he understood with resignation...and, surprisingly, without too much self-pity...that what he must do now was decide how he would spend what little time remained to him, and how he would bring about his own death when the clock ran out.

Their westward flight had made for an unnaturally long night; by rights, the eleven hours that had passed since they left Madrid should have taken them through the night and well into the morning. Instead, when the flight attendant switched on the cabin lights and announced the imminent distribution of breakfast, it was still pitch-dark outside.

A/N: Thanks to my brilliant support team, corianderpie and exartemarte, for sorting out my POVs and antecedents, and setting me straight on the materials from which airplanes are made.

The Occasional Foolish Risk

Chapter 15 of 16

airports, owls, and a fangirl cameo

15 The Occasional Foolish Risk

Hermione stood with her forehead resting against the tiled wall, letting the cool water wash the accumulated sweat and grit from her body. It was such a relief to let go the reins for a while and just *breathe*. Traveling with Snape was a bit like having a cranky four-year-old in tow...she was aware that he wasn't enjoying himself, and pestered by a constant niggling anxiety that he would wander off and get lost. Plus, he had been more ill-humored than usual when they arrived in São Paulo, complaining that her snoring had kept him awake.

"I don't snore. And besides, why didn't you take some Dreamless Sleep before we took off? That's what I always do."

"Because," he said with asperity, "you expressly forbade any sort of magic."

"Any spells and so forth. But taking a potion isn't a problem."

"Now you tell me."

"Well, you can sleep after we get to the hotel. Just now we have to get through customs."

He had taken his annoyance out on her by leaving her to lug her own suitcase through the customs checkpoint and heave it back onto the conveyor belt.

Fernanda had been waiting for them at the departure gate for their connecting flight, and Hermione noticed that Snape's mood...or at least the outward display of it...improved visibly when she introduced them. He actually *smiled*, the fatuous git.

"How'd you get through security without a boarding pass?" asked Hermione.

Fer grinned and waggled her fingers in the air. "You know: 'These aren't the droids you're looking for.'"

Snape looked gratifyingly mystified by this statement.

Fer handed her a slip of paper. "Your owls are in the cargo hold. Just pick them up with your checked luggage when you get to Manaus. I sent four of those little burrowing owls and one frigatebird in case you need to ship any packages."

"Thank you," said Snape silkily, and smiled even more broadly, if such a thing was possible. "We are most grateful for the trouble you've gone to."

Hermione regarded him with frank astonishment and no small measure of irritation. He was looking at Fernanda with the quiet, focused intensity that he usually reserved for complex potions formulas or a good single-malt whisky. She'd certainly never seen him look at *her* that way, and *she'd* saved his wretched life. The owls would be a tremendous help, of course, and it really had been kind of Fer to organize them, but it wasn't as if she'd offered to give him a kidney, for god's sake.

"Fer and I are going for a coffee," she said crossly, taking Fernanda's arm and throwing Snape a look that said, as clearly as she could make it *you are not invited*.

"What an interesting-looking man," said Fernanda, looking back over her shoulder as Hermione steered her towards a coffee shop. She grinned wickedly. "He gives me a delicious feeling between my toes."

Hermione was only half listening...distracted by fatigue, the task of summoning up her Portuguese to order the coffee, and her irritation with Snape. "He...what? Snape? Your toes?"

"Yes," Fernanda said. "The big ones."

It took Hermione a second to parse this, and when she did, she gaped at Fernanda. "Seriously? Snape? Are you joking?" She was aware, as the words were leaving her mouth, that the reaction was reflexive, the kind of thing she would have said automatically when she was at Hogwarts.

"You don't find him attractive?"

"Attractive? No," she said, with more conviction than she felt. "He's got that nose." Which had, of course, nothing to do with anything. He was Professor Snape, and that alone took him off the, well, table.

"To hell with the nose," said Fernanda. "He has those *eyes*. And that *voice*. You're going to be six weeks in the jungle listening to that *voice*." The grin returned. "Besides, you know what they say about the size of a man's nose."

Hermione jabbed her in the shoulder with a finger. "Stop it, you. I don't need to be speculating on the size of Severus Snape's cock."

"Is he sharing your tent? Maybe you'll get to see it, and you can report back to me. Just send one of the owls. Or the frigatebird, if necessary."

"Shut *up!* Talk to me about something else." She cast about for a suitably neutral topic. "How are your parents? Still peeved about you moving out and living on your own?"

"Getting over it. It's my dad more than my mom, if you want the truth. He has visions of devious men taking advantage of my innocence and vulnerability to rob me of my virtue if he's not there to guard it."

Hermione laughed. "Any truth to that?"

"I'm working on it. Give me time." She paused for a moment, a smile teasing at the corners of her mouth. "I have some vacation coming...maybe I should come visit you and have a sleepover in the jungle."

This remark irked Hermione more than it should have. After all, why should it bother her if Fernanda made leering references to Snape?

But it did bother her. It bothered her a lot, in fact. Which was something she was going to have to examine in detail once she was by herself.

For now, she focused on catching up with Fer, exchanging amusing stories with her about their jobs and complaining affectionately about what a bother it was to have dads who constantly nagged one to floss more. They drank their coffees and gossiped about friends: who had got married and who had had babies and who had decided she was a lesbian and left her husband to run off with the Beauxbatons flight instructor.

Back at the gate, she kissed Fer goodbye and watched grumpily as Snape took advantage of local custom to upgrade the air kiss on the cheek to something involving actual contact, and to extend the duration that tiny bit more, just enough that it was clearly deliberate, but not long enough to get himself slapped.

Her mood wasn't improved by his remarking, once Fer was out of earshot, "You could have warned me your friend was so... attractive." The pause made it sound as though he'd been on the verge of saying something else...probably, knowing him, something completely inappropriate...and had stopped himself just in time.

"Look around you," she said shortly. "You're in Brazil. Attractive women are thick on the ground here. No need to be crude about it." Which was unfair, of course, as he hadn't been the least bit crude.

But he didn't take the bait, the prat, just looked at her in obvious amusement, and she was saved from further discussion of the topic by the announcement of their flight.

Now, standing exhausted in the shower in her Manaus hotel suite, she made herself think about that flash of annoyance at the harmless flirtation that had passed back and forth between Fernanda and Severus. It had been nothing...less than nothing, really...just the kind of mutual acknowledgment of the other's potential as a sexual partner that so often leavens the social interactions of people between the ages of eighteen and eighty. She herself had engaged in it countless times, with a broad range of men and women, regardless of whether she felt any actual attraction to them.

But never with Snape. Or about Snape. Or in Snape's presence, even.

There had been that second, in the lab, when she had abruptly confronted...at least in concept, not in the flesh, thank god...his maleness; and if she was honest, she'd been looking at him differently ever since that moment. But this new awareness of him was still at odds with an image forged in her childhood and reinforced throughout her adolescence: the greasy git, the loathsome, repugnant Potions Master. She and her classmates had all had schoolgirl crushes on Lockhart (which made her laugh, now, because of course Lockhart had been gay, not to mention batshit crazy and a stonking great egotistical wanker). Some of had them even swooned over Draco's arrogant, patrician father. But as far as she had been aware, no one, not even the Slytherins, had spared a single hormonal flutter for Severus Snape.

Lockhart, she thought now. Lockhart had been a watershed for her...the last time she'd ever fallen for a man just because he was pretty to look at. It was as if that misguided infatuation, and the ensuing disillusionment, had matured her romantic tastes at a stroke.

She thought back over the men she'd been interested in since. Ron hardly counted...theirs was a connection born of proximity, and adrenaline, and the conviction that every day might be their last. As soon as the war was over, her romance with Ron ended, too, each regarding the other with mortified awkwardness. And then, of course, he had fallen into step with Harry in the Ministry's postwar abominations, and the friendship had been over as well.

Who else had there been, really? Viktor, for a brief while...and Viktor wasn't good-looking by any stretch of the imagination. Nor was he especially clever, though he wasn't dim, either. The thing that had caught Hermione's attention...fired her imagination, made her think about him in that way, made her want him...was his extraordinary skill at one single thing. On the ground, he was just another bloke. But on a broom, in the air, he took your breath away, anticipating his opponents' moves before they even thought of them, inhabiting his own body in a way that turned her knees to water.

And after Ron? She'd briefly felt the same way about a Mediwizard from the US, one of an international team of specialists that had come over in the aftermath of the war. And later, a violist from the London Phil, a man who, as naturally as breathing, brought forth from his instrument a voice of sweet, piercing melancholy, like the grieving of angels.

In both cases, her lovesickness had not survived deeper acquaintance with its object: the American had turned out to have a wife and two veg back in Boston, and the violist had sixteen cats and a mother-of-pearl-inlaid box containing a decade's worth of carefully hoarded toenail parings.

Since then, there had been no one. Of course, that depended on how you defined things. Because technically speaking, there had been quite a few, including a great many of her former Hogwarts classmates (including oh-god-what-was-she-thinking Draco Malfoy) and a fair number of Muggle men (and the occasional woman) met in bars or on holiday, and more than a few research colleagues in one or another of the countries she'd gone specimen-hunting (ha!) in. Every one of them taken up and discarded almost immediately, until...about five years ago...she had realized that what she was looking for was in the past, and couldn't be recaptured, and there was an end to it.

So she had just... stopped. And begun working a little more obsessively, and drinking a little more...well, a lot more...and taking the occasional foolish risk in order to piss off the Ministry. But no more fucking, because at least this way the only one who might get hurt was her.

So it wasn't accurate to say "no one," if sex was what you were talking about. It was no one only in the sense that there hadn't been anyone who had captured her attention, had given her that same sense of longing, of yearning mixed with helpless admiration that Viktor had first triggered in her a lifetime ago. She had gradually come to look upon that remembered feeling as an illusion based on the confluence of adolescent hormones and the emotional thrill ride that was coming of age in wartime.

Very tentatively, she tested the idea of Severus in that role. He certainly wasn't eye candy...but then he wasn't hard to look at, either. Fer had put her finger on it when she'd called his looks "interesting." So that was all right, but nothing likely to awaken the slumbering beast in her.

No. If the beast was stirring, it was in response to that other thing, the thing that had always been her particular weakness...the extraordinary ability and mastery of his craft, skill so absolute that it deceived the beholder into thinking it effortless. Add to that his ferocious integrity, and a sardonic wit sharp enough to match her own, thrust for thrust and parry for parry.

Of course. Of course.

She turned off the tap and stepped out of the shower.

"Fuck," she said.

A/N: My beta/britpick team, corianderpie and exartemarte, have extraordinary vision in many senses of the word.

Special thanks this chapter to ferporcel for making an unscheduled guest appearance!

The Trajectory of the Mayhem

The river was unlike any Severus had ever seen.

For one thing, its size was staggering. The three of them had boarded the little motorized launch just upstream of an area where construction was beginning on a massive bridge; Severus had stood on the wooden pier and looked across the water in the predawn light and had barely been able to discern the low profile of the trees on the opposite bank. Two miles at least, he thought, perhaps three...and if they were building a bridge here, this would presumably be one of the narrower stretches.

Furthermore, this river, Moacir told him (in Portuguese, but with enough gesturing that Severus's rudimentary grasp of Spanish enabled him to get the gist), was not even the Amazon itself: it was the Rio Negro, which joined the Solimões about five miles farther downstream to effectively double its volume and form the Amazon. The sheer power and wildness of it was so far removed from Britain's gentle and civilized waterways that it hardly seemed fair to use the same word to refer to them.

And then there was its color. Rivers, in Severus's admittedly limited experience, were either a muddy brown or a muddy green. From any distance, the surface of the Rio Negro looked like ink; close to, it was a deep transparent brown, like very strong tea or even black coffee.

He had seen the juncture of the Solimões and the Negro from the air, he now realized, as their aeroplane had made its approach into Manaus; but the sight was so odd, and he had been so fatigued, that it had failed to register at the time. The Solimões was the more familiar café-au-lait color, and where the two rivers joined, the waters ran side by side, unmingled, for perhaps another fifty miles: black on one side and tan on the other.

The bustle of urban activity that was Manaus had disappeared in shockingly short order: fifteen minutes upstream there was nothing left of civilization, and the vegetation crowded forward over the riverbank and spilled drunkenly out into the water.

As soon as the first bend in the river was behind them, Hermione had drawn her wand and silenced the blat-blat-blat of the outboard motor, so that the launch now glided noiselessly through the dark water. Looking over the edge, Severus could see the shapes of fishes darting to and fro, their silver tinted amber by the water. As he watched, the surface was pocked by the first fat raindrops, and within a few seconds the tin canopy of the launch was drumming with a steady rainfall.

Hermione, who had been leaning back on her elbows in the prow of the boat, ducked back under the canopy and lay down on the bench in front of him, closing her eyes with a little hum of contentment. Her arm slid between the two broad planks that formed the seat and backrest of the bench and dangled loosely, little rills of water trickling down it and dripping from her fingertips onto the deck. Severus took a handkerchief from his trouser pocket and nudged it gently against her hand; she opened her eyes and took it from him.

"Thanks," she murmured, wiping first her arms, and then each raised leg in turn, with the folded square of cloth. She had taken off the gaudy Wellingtons she'd worn to board the boat and was now barefoot; Severus saw with amusement and a little pulse of adolescent lust that her toenails were painted pink.

All the way aft, Moacir sat unperturbed at the tiller, the downpour plastering his hair to his skull and soaking his t-shirt and shorts clean through in a matter of seconds.

"Not a verbose chap," said Severus.

"The Indians usually aren't," she said. "They generally think white people make a lot of unnecessary noise."

This hardly seemed an invitation to further conversation, so he withdrew into silence and lay back on the wooden bench. Just aft of him, the four small owls slept in their cage, looking oddly headless with their beaks tucked under their wings. As soon as they had got underway, Hermione had released the frigatebird, and it glided now alongside them, impelled by the slow, steady pumping of its powerful wings, as apparently unfazed by the downpour as Moacir. As Severus watched, his head resting on one folded arm, it dropped suddenly to the water as if shot, only to reappear a second later with a struggling fish in its beak. With a single snap, the fish was gone, and the great bird stroked on as before.

A pleasant lassitude began to steal over him, and he closed his eyes and gave himself over to the sound of the rainfall on the metal canopy, and the smooth motion of the boat through the warm, humid air. He was aware of Hermione stretched out next to him, and indulged himself in a fantasy that they were lying together in a bed instead of on the narrow wooden benches, separated not by the seat backs and a layer of social convention and inhibition but by a few insignificant inches of space.

It came to him with a twinge that he would no more know how to advance his suit in that situation than in his present one. While he had certainly fucked his share of women, he had never actually had a proper girlfriend. Had never, in fact, invited a woman into his own bed or woken up next to one in hers. And he'd certainly never navigated the transition from friend and companion to lover; the pain of his one failed venture in that arena had been enough to put him off repeated attempts.

Sex had been one of the perquisites of membership in Voldemort's entourage, a tangible contributor to the sense of belonging that had so easily and thoroughly seduced his pathetic teen-aged self. If on those occasions he had closed his eyes and thought helplessly of Lily, well, no one had been the wiser, and even so the business had been an order of magnitude more thrilling and satisfying than the desperate late-night wanks under cover of a Muffliato charm that had punctuated his lonely existence in the Slytherin dormitories.

And then once he'd been on staff at Hogwarts, his sexual liaisons had all been of the professional sort. Lucius had introduced him to a Hog's Head chambermaid who, once a fortnight, gave him a cheerful and matter-of-fact three-galleon blowjob, and every couple of months he visited a more exclusive establishment in Knockturn Alley where he had a longstanding barter arrangement with the proprietress: in exchange for a steady supply of contraceptive, lubricant, and performance-enhancing potions, he spent an afternoon with one (or, on one memorable occasion, two) of the girls who worked there.

And then there had been the final few years in the Dark Lord's service, about which the less remembered the better.

Now, however, he had no earthly idea how to suggest to Hermione that their relationship move in the direction of the physical. He supposed he might begin by encouraging her to drink too much, as unsporting as that might seem. But if he was honest, he was angling for more than a single night, so manipulating her into doing something she'd regret the next morning seemed a bit short-sighted. It was all going to end soon enough anyway, and that end would likely be ugly if she discovered, before he had a chance to make his exit, that he'd been spying on her for the Ministry. He'd like to get a few good weeks out of it at least before the inevitable happened.

There were bound to be books on the subject of seduction, but at the moment he was arguably about as far away from a useful library or bookshop as it was possible to get. Common sense would suggest that the best approach would be gradual, measured, and vigilant. Preliminary reconnaissance, followed by a first tentative sortie (a double-entendre remark, perhaps, or a longer-than-necessary touch when passing her a beaker, that sort of thing), and then a watchful retreat to see whether she would respond in kind.

An irritatingly military analogy, he realized...as if he were mounting a campaign of destruction instead of trying to get into a girl's knickers. Christ, why did this have to be so difficult?

He imagined just reaching for her hand now and taking it, stroking his fingers against her palm, and then gently drawing one fingertip up her arm. He wouldn't need to say anything; she would understand instantly (because of course she would have been thinking about the same thing all along) and would reach for him, perhaps murmur his name. In one smooth motion (no awkward clambering, because this was *his* fantasy, after all) he would be kneeling in front of her, would lean over and press his mouth to hers (gently at first, then with increasing forcefulness, the dominant male asserting his right), one hand cradling the nape of her neck, the other snaking downward and slipping under the fabric of her blouse to cup one small, round, perfect breast, his thumb brushing lightly over her hardening nipple...

Shit. Something was getting hard, and it wasn't her nipple. He slid his foot along the bench to raise his right knee, and reached back in his memory for the techniques that

teen-aged boys use to rid themselves of spontaneous and unwelcome erections. Hold your breath (hard-ons need oxygen). Clench your arse-cheeks (muscles take precedence in the blood supply). Think about collecting rat spleens.

Jesus. What a minefield this was. (And we're back, he thought wryly, to the war metaphor.) Given time, he could pick his way across safely, could gauge her reactions, find out the things she liked and do them, breach her defenses, woo her, seduce her...

But, fuck it all, he didn't have time.

She'd been annoyed when he'd flirted with her friend, and he supposed that was a hopeful sign.

There had also been a couple of occasions when the two of them had seemed on the verge of a quantum shift in the intimacy of their friendship.

When she had healed his arse-cheek from the wound left by the Vorapulpan, she'd seemed genuinely concerned (oh, stop equivocating, you twat, she clearly was concerned), both when she ministered to his injury and later, when she insisted that he not brew a replacement batch whilst he was alone in the lab. Of course, that could have been simple human decency...he often forgot that such a thing existed, was indeed even commonplace in normal people...and she had definitely not risen to the bait when he had suggested, under cover of facetiousness, that she take off her clothes. She had just rolled her eyes at him and said, "Prat," and they had talked some more about etymologies, and then he had gone home.

Then, week before last, things had progressed a bit further when they'd had that intense conversation about the episode in the Shrieking Shack and its immediate sequelae. (Even now, a part of him was sneering at himself for his retreat into scholarly language when he recalled those things, as if doing so could distance him from the wretchedness of them.) She hadn't flinched away from him when he had touched her face, and although he had intended the conversation to go in a different direction (he'd had no idea that her scar had anything to do with that gruesome afternoon; was, in fact, his own fault, another bit of tragic detritus scattered along the trajectory of the mayhem set in motion by his adolescent perfidy), the more passionate she had become, the more he had felt the connection between them intensifying. It all might actually have led somewhere, had he not panicked and fled, overcome by his own helplessness and shame.

He knew he had a tendency to overcerebrate, to try to reduce every dilemma or human problem to a mathematical formula or puzzle of logic that could be approached and solved methodically. He didn't really know any other way, and the few occasions when he had allowed free rein to his baser impulses had turned out so disastrously that it still seemed the safest course. He was thus deep in consideration of how he might maneuver Hermione into another intense emotional conversation when he was jerked back into the present by the touch of her hand on his arm.

In the fraction of a second it took him to open his eyes and look at her, he had already processed the touch (warm, damp, tentative) and his mind had raced ahead to imagine that somehow, hers had been traveling along a parallel track as the two of them had lain side by side, half-asleep on the wooden benches. This was it, then: there was no need for him to agonize over making his move, because, oh god, she was making hers.

He turned his head to see her lift a finger to her lips and point, with the hand that had touched his arm and now no longer did, towards the near bank, where a cluster of animals that looked like nothing so much as grotesquely overgrown guinea pigs were grazing.

"Capybara," she whispered, and reached slowly for an embroidered bag that lay at the far end of the bench. The largest of the beasts lifted its blunt head and sniffed the air. Hermione took a small camera from the bag and raised it in front of her face, then gave a snort of exasperation, which prompted the whole group of capybara to startle and dive into the water.

"No battery," she said disgustedly. "Well, fuck me."

"That could be arranged," said Severus, without thinking.

She looked sharply at him, and he was at once horrified and hopeful, but then she smirked and said, "In your dreams, Snape," and turned to put the camera away.

Yes, he wanted to say, *I do dream of it*, but what of course came automatically to his lips was "Just the nightmares, actually."

Hermione turned back around and fixed him with a penetrating look, and he watched, helpless and mortified, as awareness dawned on her.

"Severus," she began, and stopped.

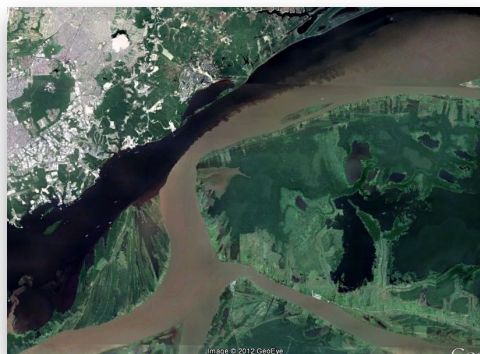
He cleared his throat. "Never mind," he said. "I was joking."

"No," she said slowly. "No, I don't believe you were."

A/N

Thanks as always to my brilliant beta/britpick team, corianderpie and exartemarte. I'd be lost without their eagle eyes and keen word sense.

The meeting of the Negro and Solimões rivers to form the Amazon is one of the most arresting sights imaginable. The two distinct waters do run for some miles side-by-side...you can see a GoogleEarth image here



and a couple closeups of the juncture of the waters here



and here

